

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**EDUCATION QUALITY IN MALAWI:
WHAT ROLE FOR DECENTRALISATION?**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Social Policy of the
London School of Economics and Political Science for the degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

London, May 2018

Declaration

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Abstract

Contested, multi-faceted and conceptually confused, the relationship between decentralisation and education quality is not well understood. In this thesis, I use qualitative and quantitative methods to undertake an empirical exploration of decentralisation, education quality and the relationship between them in the context of Malawi. Through semi-structured interviews, I first consider how different actors within Malawi understand decentralisation and its implementation. I find that despite stalled democratic decentralisation, a new school-based management reform (the Primary School Improvement Programme) has gone ahead, financed mainly by international donors. Whilst the reform is welcomed by communities, it fails to counter the continued pressures to centralise power by Malawi's ruling class.

To understand if education decentralisation can lead to positive outcomes despite resistance to broader decentralisation reform, I investigate the effect of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) on pre-defined indicators of education quality. Exploiting its staggered national roll out and using standard difference-in-difference estimation, I find that the PSIP improves exam pass rates, reduces school dropout and increases the availability of toilets for girls. Put simply, these findings suggest that the PSIP 'works', although the reliability and validity of Malawi's school census data is questionable.

Finally, I turn to a deeper examination of education quality and its relationship with the PSIP through four case study schools. I find that the PSIP impact on schools is varied; while it creates the opportunity for schools and communities to work together towards school improvement, it also fosters suspicion about the management of school grants and tension over what to prioritise to improve education quality. Parents, community members and teachers are more likely to understand education quality in terms of quantity (classrooms, learning materials, numbers of students passing exams) while policymakers are more concerned with the acquisition of skills. This disconnect undermines the coherence and alignment of the reform. Making an original theoretical contribution, I show that there is a two-way relationship between decentralisation and education quality with implications for policy.

Acknowledgments

I have benefited from the support of many people since I started this project and I am grateful to all of them, from the staff in Wright's Bar who kept me energised with caramel shortbread, to the district official who helped me cross a flooded river to reach a school.

For your guidance, support and academic rigour, I would like to thank my supervisors Anne West and Stephen Jenkins. I have benefited immensely from Anne's encouragement and thoroughness ever since my first Masters at LSE in 2005. Stephen's frankness, logic and good humour has been a great source of energy and challenge.

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of several institutions. First and foremost, the Ministry of Education in Malawi for support with data and for my fieldwork, in particular McKnight Kalanda, Martin Masanche and Victor Steenbergen. Second, Link Community Development, for the logistical support during my fieldwork. Third, I am grateful to my colleagues at the Department for International Development (DFID) for giving me time and encouragement to complete my thesis. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the ESRC for funding my PhD.

I cannot attempt to name every person who has supported me in some way, but I will start with all my fieldwork participants: government officials, teachers, parents and community leaders who gave freely of their time and shared their ideas which form the basis of my PhD. I am grateful too to my research assistant, Choice Mchenga, who helped me to better understand the context of the schools we visited.

Thank you to the friends and colleagues who have read drafts of chapters and provided invaluable feedback, guidance and good conversation at various points in time: Emma Gremley, Ken Longden, Ben Alcott, Ben Wilson, Steve Harvey, Ludovica Gambaro, Anila Channa, and Laura Savage. Thank you also to Vincenzo Scrutinio and Arthur Muteesasira for your technical support. My great friends, Tim Powell-Jackson and Simon Jackson, have been steadfast in their moral and academic support. I must also thank my parents who instilled in me a love of learning.

Above all, I thank Giulia. This PhD journey has been long and at times difficult, but you always encouraged me to keep going. We always said that life would be an adventure and I am so happy to be living it with you and now also with our two beautiful daughters.

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List of acronyms

DEM	District Education Manager
DFID	Department for International Development
DSS	Direct Support to Schools
EFA	Education For All
EMIS	Education Management Information System
ESIP	Education Sector Implementation Plan
FTI	Fast Track Initiative
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
LDF	Local Development Fund
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MGDS	Malawi Growth and Development Strategy
MK	Malawi Kwacha
MoEST	Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
NDP	National Development Plan
NESP	National Education Sector Plan
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PEA	Primary Education Adviser
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PLSC	Primary School Leaving Certificate
PSIP	Primary School Improvement Programme
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
SACMEQ	Southern and East African Consortium Measuring Education Quality
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SIG	School Improvement Grant
SIP	School Improvement Plan
SMC	School Management Committee
UDF	United Democratic Front
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VDC	Village Development Committee

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a change because at least the government is trying to give a small power to the school so that we can organise things on our own. Of course, with the support from the government, we can have our own initiatives to improve the quality of education at school. In the past, we used to rely on the high authorities. [Head Teacher, School 3]

This Head Teacher at a primary school in Malawi thinks that giving more power to schools can help improve education quality. The quotation suggests that organising ‘things’ at a school level is more effective than relying on ‘high authorities’; by giving only ‘small power’ to the school, it also suggests that ‘government’ retains the “big power” and still has a role to play in providing support.

What is the relationship between decentralisation and education quality? What is meant by the terms ‘decentralisation’ and ‘education quality’? This thesis will explore these issues, rooting the empirical research in lived experience whilst also assessing the credibility of a causal relationship between a measure of decentralisation and indicators of education quality.

Whilst the breadth and depth of experimentation with decentralisation now covers most of the world (Faguet and Pöschl 2015), the evidence of its effectiveness is mixed. There is a significant body of research on decentralisation that considers its typology (Rondinelli et al. 1983; Samoff 1990; Fiske 1996; McGinn and Welsh 1999) but a degree of ambiguity and conceptual confusion remains, particularly within the empirical work. This leads to a lack of clarity and rigour when researching decentralisation and may explain the mixed findings on the relationship between decentralisation reform and improvements in public service delivery (see Chapter 2).

From increasing the quantity and quality of inputs, facilitating citizen participation in decision-making to shifting the structure of accountability to local constituents, the literature suggests a number of mechanisms that may link decentralisation reform with a notion of improved education quality (Colletta and Perkins 1995; Francis and James 2003; Mehrotra 2005; Faguet and Sanchez 2008; Bruns et al. 2011).

Researchers also challenge these claims for decentralisation. While proponents argue that decentralisation will enhance local decision-making, critics point out that local authorities and communities often do not have the financial and technical capacity to carry out decentralised responsibilities, and thus decentralisation may simply re-locate the locus of power to the resourceful group (see, for instance, Mankoe and Maynes 1994; Hanson 1998; Galiani et al. 2008).

‘Quality’ was an Education For All goal since the 2000 Dakar framework declared it to be at the heart of education and a fundamental determinant of student enrolment, retention and achievement (UNESCO 2000). Meanwhile, along with quality, the concept of ‘learning’ featured a decade earlier in no fewer than three of the six education goals agreed in Jomtien (UNESCO 1990). Despite its inclusion in global policy frameworks since 1990, relatively little attention was paid to quality and learning over the two decades that followed. This can, in part, be attributed to problems with definition and measurability as well as the primacy of the more reductionist Millennium Development Framework in its focus on access to school. And, as Alexander argues, numbers offer headlines and dramatic immediacy; quality does not (Alexander 2015:250).

While the Millennium Development Goal emphasised enrolment, the new Sustainable Development Goal on education shifts focus, committing the world to ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education (UN General Assembly 2015). Although the concept of quality education is not defined, a focus on learning outcomes, considered as a key dimension of quality, permeates much of the new 2030 Agenda.¹ Education quality has become synonymous with learning outcomes within international policy discourse (see, for instance, Winthrop et al. 2015; World Bank 2018) and there is a rapidly growing body of research aimed at finding out ‘what works’ to raise learning outcomes (see, for instance, Snilstveit et al. 2015 and Evans and Popova 2016, discussed in Chapter 2).

Despite this global trend, UNESCO’s Global Education Monitoring Report states that ‘good quality education should not be equated with, or reduced to, learning outcomes’ (UNESCO 2016:188). The need or otherwise for a definition of education quality is disputed. Criteria and frameworks to understand education quality have been developed

¹ The resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015, “Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development”, is referred to as “the 2030 Agenda”, “the SDGs” (Sustainable Development Goals) or “the Global Goals”.

and contested within a broad range of approaches (see, for instance, Coleman 1966; Hirst and Peters 1970; Hawes and Stephens 1990; Bergmann 1996; Sayed 1997; UNESCO 2004; Tikly and Barrett 2011).

Irrespective of how decentralisation and education quality are conceptualised, global statistics on education are stark. Whilst the number of primary-aged children out of school globally has fallen since 1990 from over 110 million to 61 million in 2014, there has been almost no change since 1999 in the percentage of pupils dropping out of school before the end of the primary cycle (UNESCO 2016). The available data also indicate that many children enrolled in primary school are not learning. Acknowledging that the quality and quantity of data on learning outcomes are inconsistent and limited across countries (Berry et al. 2015), the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report estimates that 250 million children cannot do basic reading and maths despite over half of them having spent four years in school (UNESCO 2014).

These data contribute to what national and international policymakers refer to as a ‘learning crisis’ (cited in Berry et al. 2015; Winthrop et al. 2015; World Bank 2018). Indeed, the concept of a ‘learning crisis’ is central to the 2018 World Development Report, *Learning to Realise Education’s Promise*.² Drawing attention to the ‘many faces of the learning crisis’, the report suggests that the low levels of learning outcomes in the developing world are at the source of inequities and widening gaps in opportunity and contribute to shortages of skilled labour for future employment (World Bank 2018:16).

Fourteen years earlier, the 2004 World Development Report contributed to the growing belief in the potential of decentralisation to improve basic services, including education. A central theme of the report, *Making Services Work For Poor People*, is the importance of accountability relations to improve the provision of basic education services, in particular, ‘how well citizens, as clients, can increase the accountability of schools and school systems’ (World Bank 2003:113). Citing dropout rates, unaffordable access, dysfunctional schools, and low client responsiveness as common problems of basic education service provision, the report highlights that in most countries, client (or

² This is the first time the World Bank’s annual World Development Report has had an exclusive focus on education.

parental) power is weak with little to no influence and parents only considered as a means to mobilise resources (World Bank 2003).

Many governments have attempted to address challenges in education service delivery by decentralising decision-making processes and related responsibilities; see, for example, Channa and Faguet (2016) for a review of the empirical literature on decentralising education services in developing countries. The extent and scope of decentralisation reform in education varies by country (Hanushek et al. 2013; Carr-Hill et al. 2015; Channa and Faguet 2016). Decisions about curricula, finance, management, and teachers can all be taken at one or more of several administrative levels: centrally at the national or federal state level, by provinces or regions within a country, by districts or by schools.

The devolution of decision-making authority to the school level has been widely adopted as the preferred model by many international donor agencies, including the World Bank, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). These agencies have bought into the theory and data suggesting that locating decision-making authority within schools will increase accountability, efficiency and responsiveness to local needs (Gertler et al. 2012; Faguet and Sanchez 2008; Bruns et al. 2011; World Bank 2018). Furthermore, devolving authority to schools, enables international agencies to bypass often problematic national politics by channelling resources directly to schools. What these school-level decisions constitute varies by context, from authority to decide over the allocation of a school-based grant for operational costs within the school to more substantive decisions, including the hiring and firing of teachers (Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

Despite this trend towards decentralising powers down to the school level (known as school-based management reform) and its supposed positive effect on educational outcomes, there is still limited evidence from low income countries of this general relationship, in particular within the sub-Saharan African context (Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

A growing body of empirical work on education decentralisation is part of the broader effort focused on attempts to understand ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes. The majority of these studies use quantitative approaches to test combinations of inputs (e.g. textbooks, class size, teacher incentives) or variations in policy (e.g. decentralisation, language of instruction) and their causal relationship with changes in learning outcomes. Muralidharan (2017) argues that there is perhaps no field in development economics in

the past decade that has benefitted as much from the use of experimental methods as the economics of education.

A growing number of systematic reviews of these impact evaluation studies attempt to make sense of the larger body of programme evaluations, impact assessment and broader empirical work now available (see, for instance, Snilstveit et al. 2015). One review of systematic reviews concludes that it remains difficult to establish what works best and, in all cases, it is of critical importance to understand under what circumstances the various interventions work well (Evans and Popova 2016).

When the question shifts from ‘what works’ to *under what circumstances do interventions work*, understanding the actual circumstances of an intervention becomes imperative. This means understanding how interventions are defined and implemented in practice. Indeed, one of the central challenges within the existing literature on decentralisation and education quality is conceptual confusion at the core of the subject. No single studies to date, that I am aware of, consider and empirically explore the multifaceted nature of both decentralisation and education quality.

In this thesis, I argue that an in-depth understanding of education decentralisation and education quality is of central importance to determine the effectiveness of decentralisation policy reform that seeks to improve quality. With low levels of learning achievement and many pupils dropping out of primary school before completing, data from Malawi suggest that its education challenges mirror the stark global education statistics. Malawi therefore provides an appropriate context within which to explore these issues. In this opening chapter, I now turn to a brief overview of the study setting before presenting the aim of the research, the research questions and the structure of the thesis.

1.1. STUDY SETTING: MALAWI

Malawi was among the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to abolish primary school fees in 1994, leading to a 51 per cent increase in enrolment (World Bank 2009). Pupil numbers have risen from 1.2 million children in primary school in Malawi in 1991 up to around 4.8 million in 2016 (Government of Malawi 2016). Despite significant progress on access, Malawi reports low levels of children completing a full cycle of primary education with high levels of inefficiency within the system. Just one in eight entrants to the first year of primary school (Standard 1) will progress to Standard 8 in the eight years envisaged for a full course of primary education (Ravishankar et al. 2016). Approximately 20 to 25 per cent of students will repeat their class each year (Ravishankar et al. 2016). The World Bank (2010) reported that 65 per cent of public resources in education are wasted due to pupils repeating classes and dropping out of school.

Malawi tends to rank near the bottom in the region for grade 6 English reading and maths, according to the Southern and East African Consortium Measuring Education Quality (SACMEQ III). In 2007, only 9 per cent of pupils achieved a minimum level of mastery in reading. In maths, 98 per cent of pupils did not possess skills beyond basic numeracy (World Bank 2010). In essence, Malawi is an acute case of the global trend since the Jomtien Declaration in 1990: rapid expansion in access to primary school following the removal of user fees and now facing ‘a crisis’ in levels of learning.

Following independence from British colonial rule in 1964 and thirty years under Hastings Banda, Malawi introduced multiparty democracy in 1994. A review of decentralisation initiatives followed and the National Decentralisation Policy was approved in 1998 (Government of Malawi 1998). Its objectives included the creation of a democratic environment and institutions, the promotion of accountability and good governance and the mobilisation of the masses for socio-economic development (Government of Malawi 1998).

Decentralisation of different forms had existed in the past both under colonial rule and within Banda’s one-party state (Mamdani 1996; Olowu and Wunsch 2004). Despite the long history of decentralisation and more recent policy and legislative reform, democratic decentralisation in Malawi remains limited. A lack of political will and challenges related to weak capacity at district level are reasons suggested for the slow pace of reform

(Chiweza 2010). In education, central government continues to hold significant power despite primary education being devolved, in principle, to each of the thirty-four districts.

It is within this context of unevenly implemented decentralisation reform and with significant international donor support that the Government of Malawi introduced the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) in 2010. At the time the PSIP was introduced, around 30 per cent of the national education budget was financed by international donors (Ravishankar et al. 2016). While on-budget donor financing has significantly reduced since 2010, it remains around 10 per cent and continues to be influential (Ravishankar et al. 2016); it is likely that the PSIP would not have been introduced without international donor support.

The core feature of the PSIP is the disbursement of grants to schools, on condition that schools and communities have a school improvement plan and attendant budget. The PSIP includes the training, by central and district government officials, of representatives from schools and communities on how to develop school improvement plans and budgets and related financial management good practice. The main goal of the PSIP is ‘to enhance and improve education decentralisation’ with a specific objective to ‘improve the quality of education in schools’ (Government of Malawi 2010a:10).

The PSIP is a clearly defined intervention within the primary subsector and not explicitly dependent on wider decentralisation reform for its implementation. Through its focus on the school as the unit of improvement, it is a type of school-based management reform and represents the first time since primary school fees were abolished that schools and communities are systematically managing government funds at the school level. Through the PSIP, additional grants are also channelled to zone and district levels to support improved monitoring and support of primary schools.

The Ministry of Education planned to phase in the PSIP over a four-year period, starting in school year 2010/11 and reaching national coverage in 2013/14. In doing so, the programme progressively replaced another donor-funded school financing initiative, Direct Support to Schools (DSS); DSS was a more narrowly focused programme with small grants managed at district level on behalf of schools and with no additional training and focus on school improvement planning (Ravishankar et al. 2016).

1.2. AIM OF THE RESEARCH

Education quality and decentralisation are contested concepts, defined and construed in different ways in different contexts and for different purposes. The aim of this research is to undertake an empirical exploration of education quality, decentralisation and the relationship between them in Malawi.

Following the start of Free Primary Education in 1994 and its focus on expanding access to primary education without a concomitant focus on improving quality (Chimombo 2005), Malawi has mirrored the continent-wide trend in education over the past three or so decades. With its first multiparty election since independence, 1994 also marked a turning point in Malawi's pursuit of decentralisation policies. Both education and broader decentralisation efforts have received widespread international donor support.

It is therefore a rich context in which to explore the concepts of education quality, decentralisation and the relationship between the two. The introduction of a specific decentralisation programme in education in 2010, the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), and its objective to improve the quality of primary education offers a window through which to investigate this empirically.

Policy interest and state investment in decentralisation as a means to improve the quality of education has been accompanied by a growing body of academic literature. While there are existing bodies of literature that consider definitions and typologies of the contested concepts of 'decentralisation' and 'education quality' as well as a separate and growing body of impact evaluation literature that examines the quantitative relationship between decentralisation policies and indicators of education quality, a careful *empirical* analysis of these contested concepts *and* of their relationship within one study is lacking.

Context matters, and it is therefore important to note that empirical work on education decentralisation in sub-Saharan Africa remains limited (Leithwood and Menzies 1998; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009). In *Making Schools Work*, Bruns et al. (2011) comment that there are few rigorously evaluated school-based management programmes compared with the number of such reforms being carried out, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa. More recently, a systematic review on school-based decision-making comments that 'although the rhetoric around decentralisation suggests that school-based management has a

positive effect on educational outcomes, there is limited evidence from low income countries of this general relationship' (Carr-Hill et al. 2015:13).

This thesis therefore seeks to make a unique contribution to knowledge through an empirical investigation of the contextual meanings of both education quality and decentralisation as well as exploring the relationship between the two within the same study, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This interdisciplinary approach combines econometric tests for the broad questions amenable to such techniques with qualitative research that probes deeper into meanings, contrasting perspectives and issues where purely quantitative methods are either impossible or inappropriate.

By bringing together qualitative and quantitative approaches in this way, I aim to generate a higher level of overall methodological rigour that will make both a methodological and an empirical contribution to our understandings of education quality, decentralisation and the relationship between the two, particularly within a sub-Saharan African context.

Two clarifications about the terms used in this thesis are necessary at this point. Explorations of both decentralisation and education quality are two principal objectives of this study. Effort is therefore made to be clear on what is meant by each term when used throughout the thesis. When there is no accepted definition of the concept, I intentionally use each as a contested concept with multiple meanings and open to interpretation.

Second, the focus of this study is on the primary education sub-sector in Malawi. Children are expected to start primary school in Malawi at the age of six and complete by the age of thirteen (Ravishankar et al. 2016). Primary school runs for eight years from Standard 1 through to Standard 8 at which point pupils sit for their Primary School Leaving Certificate. In referring to 'education' and 'school' throughout this thesis, I am referring to primary school unless otherwise stated.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

One overall research question and three sub-questions guide my research. The questions derive from a review of the literature and identified knowledge gaps presented in the next chapter (section 2.3).

These research questions allow me to make a valuable contribution to empirically grounded conceptualisations of education quality, decentralisation and the relationship between the two. The fieldwork will site the conceptual debates in real lives and demonstrate the extent to which deep contextual understanding can help better understand both theorised and narrowly identified associations between decentralisation and education quality. While this study makes a contribution to the literatures on both education quality and decentralisation, more fundamentally, I seek to systematically break down the line between them.

(Overall Research Question) To what extent does decentralisation affect primary education quality in Malawi and how?

The study's overall research question combines the two contested concepts and explores the relationship between them. By asking 'how' decentralisation affects primary education quality, I leave open all possibilities for how the relationship may play out in practice, including the extent to which conceptualisations of education quality affect how decentralisation is implemented.

This question combines the key elements of the proposed research and as such is the dominant research question. The hierarchy of research questions is justified given that the following three questions aim to break down this main question into its more clearly defined parts, using the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) in Malawi as an object of study. The overall research question is considered in the concluding chapter (Chapter 7).

(Sub-Question One) How is education decentralisation understood in Malawi?

While there continues to be conceptual confusion regarding the concept of decentralisation within the broader literature, the risk of pre-defining the concept in this

study could result in my asking the wrong question or not exploring ideas around decentralisation on the basis of its existing reality in Malawi. Education decentralisation in Malawi is the product of Malawi's social, economic and political context and history. The study considers how different actors within Malawi understand its rationale, purpose and progress. Analysis of this sub-question, in Chapter 4, allows for a deep understanding of education decentralisation and how one specific piece of policy reform (the Primary School Improvement Programme) sits within the broader decentralisation context.

(Sub-Question Two) What is the effect of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) on education quality?

As has been noted, there are few rigorously evaluated school-based management programmes compared with the number of such reforms being carried out, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. This study, while empirically exploring the broader concepts and their inter-relationship, makes a contribution to the programme evaluation literature by examining the effects of a specific education decentralisation programme (the PSIP) operating at national scale. This sub-question is addressed in Chapter 5.

(Sub-Question Three) What is the relationship between different perspectives of education quality and the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP)?

The final sub-question combines an exploration of education quality alongside a consideration of the mechanisms that may link decentralisation (the PSIP in this case) with the quality of education as understood from different perspectives.

Education quality is a complex and contested concept. Given the theoretical debates about the definition(s) of quality in education (Chapter 2, section 2.1), I consider how education quality is understood in Malawi from different perspectives, importantly rooting this exploration within people's lived experience. I explore perspectives that range from central government policymakers and international donor representatives, to head teachers, teachers and parents at the community level.

Through case studies in four schools, this research question enables me to explore the potential of a two-way relationship between decentralisation and the concept of education quality. This sub-question is considered in Chapter 6.

1.4. STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

The thesis comprises seven chapters, including this one. Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on education quality and education decentralisation. First, I consider the range of theoretical approaches to understanding education quality, before reviewing the rise in empirical literature examining ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes in low income settings. Section 2.2 starts by considering the forms and focus of decentralisation, followed by an exploration of a broader conceptual understanding of decentralisation and its potential links to improved service delivery. Before a review of the empirical literature on the relationship between decentralisation and education quality, I locate decentralisation discourse within the broader literature on ‘good governance’ and neopatrimonialism (Pryor 2005; Bach 2011). The chapter concludes by reviewing the gaps in the literature, and linking these gaps to the research questions.

Chapter 3 is divided into two parts. First, I locate the research within the Malawi context and consider its economic and political history before focusing on Malawi’s education sector, including a description of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP). The chapter ends with an overview of the methods used in the study, including a justification for a mixed method approach and some of the limitations to the proposed approach.

Chapters 4 to 6 present the study’s empirical findings. First, a documentary review and qualitative study enables an exploration of the nature and meaning of education decentralisation in Malawi (Chapter 4). In so doing, it contextualises the quantitative analysis of the effects of the PSIP presented in Chapter 5. The analysis exploits the phased roll out of the PSIP in order to identify appropriate treatment and comparison groups. The final empirical chapter starts by presenting the findings on how education quality is understood from different perspectives and ends in an analysis of two pairs of case study schools at different stages of PSIP implementation.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis. I answer the research questions and discuss the findings in the context of the existing literature with a particular focus on my original contributions and the implications for policy and future research.

2. LITERATURE: EDUCATION QUALITY & DECENTRALISATION

The concepts of education quality and decentralisation are both contested. This chapter seeks to navigate theoretical approaches, empirical studies and diverse perspectives which explore these two concepts and their relationship. The objective is to ground this thesis within the existing literature, to critique existing approaches, to identify gaps in the literature and to provide the basis for the methodological approach presented in Chapter 3. I define the best approach to understanding each concept in the context of this thesis and in so doing provide the foundation for the task of investigating the link between education quality and decentralisation empirically in Malawi. The chapter also makes a contribution to knowledge by bringing together and critiquing these two bodies of literature in one place.

Section 1 begins by exploring the conceptual challenge of defining education quality. A theoretical discussion is complemented by consideration of the current international discourse on education quality, its focus on learning outcomes and the growing body of research on ‘what works’ to achieve them. I conclude this section by outlining what I see as the best approach to defining education quality, highlighting the importance of exploring understandings of education quality through the empirical work.

Section 2 starts with a discussion about education decentralisation, its forms, expected outcomes and potential pitfalls. An exploration of two central mechanisms that may link decentralisation to quality are then discussed: participation and accountability. The concept of accountability is developed further in the context of a principal-agent framework, used here as an analytical device to support a deeper understanding of the relationship between accountability and decentralisation. A closer examination of school-based management follows before these discussions are rooted within the broader context of what has motivated decentralisation reform (in Sub-Saharan Africa). In light of the study context (Chapter 3), attention is then given to empirical studies on school-based management reform and their relationship with education quality.

The chapter concludes by summarising the gaps in knowledge identified within the existing literature, linking these to the research questions and making clear the contribution to knowledge that this thesis aims to make.

2.1. EDUCATION QUALITY

The notion of education quality is complex. The use of the concept carries multiple meanings and reflects different ideological, social and political values. Within the literature, there is a conspicuous lack of precision in the use of the word ‘quality’ and a need for closer attention to its description and analysis (Alexander 2015). Sayed suggests that ‘the concept of quality is elusive...frequently used but never defined’ (1997:21). Attempting to define the concept, however, may reify the practice of education, reducing it to a technical activity that is static and unaffected by contextual and contingent circumstances (Sayed 1997).

Based on the stark global education statistics presented in Chapter 1, the crisis in primary education in developing countries, described by Hawes and Stephens (1990) over twenty-five years ago, clearly persists. Back then, Hawes and Stephens (1990) suggested that there was not enough research on quality and where it existed, its focus was too narrow. Planners seeking to improve quality in education, they argued, ‘work largely in the dark’ (Hawes and Stephens 1990:8). This theme is built on by Smith (1997:43) who suggests that for the notion of quality in education to be a ‘really useful concept’ rather than a ‘catch-phrase’, criteria should be developed against which quality can be defined.

A significant challenge to developing such criteria relates to the contextual nature of quality education. The concept is subjective, depending as it does on the perceptions of stakeholders:

Concepts of quality differ across countries and according to the priorities, visions, and perspectives of different stakeholder groups – national and local government authorities, parents, children, employers and providers. (OECD 2001:63)

Hirst and Peters (1970) suggest that any consideration of quality first needs to establish an understanding of the purpose of education. Although likely to vary across both context and time, there may also be a minimum threshold of basic learning needs with more universal application which must first be satisfied before more contextual quality concerns are considered. Bergmann (1996) suggests that a minimum level of quality is a full functional literacy and a good mastery of basic mathematical operations, including the capacity to apply them to simple everyday problems.

In its 2010 publication on *Reaching the Marginalised*, the UNESCO Global Monitoring Report claims that ‘many countries are failing the quality test’ (UNESCO 2010:104). The report urges policy-makers, educators and parents to focus far more on the core purpose of education; the ‘core purpose’, it argues is:

ensuring that children acquire the skills that shape their future life chances. [...] Out-of-school children face obvious disadvantages, yet less attention has been paid to the fact that millions of children emerge from primary school each year without having acquired basic literacy and numeracy skills. Unable to formulate or read a simple sentence, these children are ill-equipped to make the transition to secondary school – let alone enter employment markets. The problems extend to secondary schools, where many children – sometimes a majority – do not reach even a minimum level of competence. (UNESCO 2010:104)

This reinforces the idea of a minimum threshold of basic learning needs that are universally applicable. It also raises the question of how to define such thresholds and the extent to which minimum levels of competence can be understood in terms of education quality. I explore these ideas further in light of the more recent international focus on learning outcomes as the main criteria for understanding education quality (section 2.1.2).

To avoid working largely in the dark and to know whether or not public policy affects changes in education quality, an approach to understanding education quality needs to be made explicit. An explicit consideration of education quality is a central part of this thesis, building on the contrasting perspectives set out below.

2.1.1. Quantitative and qualitative perspectives

Quantitative and qualitative paradigms broadly define two contrasting perspectives on education quality. From a quantitative perspective, educational quality could be understood as an unobserved (latent) concept with quantitative observables related to the generation of quality for both input and output indicators in what economists might refer to as the ‘education production function’ (see Coleman et al. 1966). These inputs (teachers, infrastructure and textbooks, for example) and output indicators (including test scores, repetition and dropout rates) may vary in both quantity and quality.

A qualitative understanding of quality pays greater attention to the subjective nature of educational quality, focusing more on process, and trying to discover what happens in the school and classroom. Schools are places where pupils develop cognitive skills but also attitudes, cultural values and beliefs.

There are challenges and risks within each perspective, including the extent to which the conceptual discussion begins to overlap with issues of measurement and a tendency for simple measures to be conflated with the more multiply-dimensional notion of quality. I will explore these issues in the two sub-sections below in which I consider a range of approaches within each perspective together with strategies used to operationalise an understanding of quality. This provides the background for how I intend to situate my approach to understanding quality in this thesis and address the limitations within the existing literature particularly related to the tendency to focus on only one perspective of education quality in any one study.

Quantitative perspectives

The ‘education production function’, presented by Coleman et al. (1966) in a seminal study in the USA, was at the forefront of quantitative studies of education. Within an ‘education production function’, a series of explanatory variables or input indicators (including school characteristics, teacher qualifications, and pupil characteristics) are transformed by school processes to determine an educational output or outcome. Test scores or learning outcomes are the favoured indicator but ‘intermediate’ output indicators are also used, including dropout from school and repetition rates (Gertler et al. 2012; Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

One way to think about quality in this context is that in the education production function relating inputs to outputs, quality is the extra aspect that produces more output for a given set of inputs. If two schools (A and B) have the same inputs and quantity of output (e.g. number of graduates), but school A produces a higher quality education (for example, the average test score among graduates is higher), the quality of education in School A is greater than in School B.

Quantitative approaches have the apparent advantage of comparability across contexts with clearly defined and objective measures, yet the ‘education production function’ is

also criticised for its failure to reflect interactions and dynamics between the central elements of input, process and output (Yu and Thomas 2008; Tikly and Barrett 2011). Some researchers refer to classroom processes and teaching and learning practice as the ‘black box’, seldom researched but central to an understanding of teaching and learning and its outcomes (Black and Wiliam 2010).

Work on the education production function has now evolved into a wide literature on school effectiveness research which began as a simple input-output model of education but now includes a range of process and context variables (Teddlie and Reynolds 2000). Predictive indicators of quality may include textbooks, instructional time, teacher experience, teacher qualifications, and class size on the input side with output indicators focused mainly on proxies for achievement.

Human capital approaches and the idea that education represents a stock of capital from which one can expect future returns are associated with the quantitative perspective. Quality education as measured by cognitive attainment has been shown to have a positive effect both on individual earnings and on economic growth at the aggregate level (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008; Hawkes and Ugur 2012). Quantitative measures of school outcomes and outputs, including test scores, attendance, and dropout are generally interpreted to be plausible indicators of future success in the labour market (Hanushek 1995). In such a conceptualisation, readily measurable outcomes shift from being indicators of quality to the defining facets of quality itself.

Similarly, input indicators of quality are frequently employed in empirical study as they are relatively straightforward to observe: the pupil-to-teacher and pupil-to-textbook ratios; the proportion of teachers with formal pre-service training; and, the presence or absence of facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and latrines. However, what really counts for quality is not the quantity of resources available to a school or school system, but rather the effectiveness with which these resources are utilised to strengthen teaching and learning (Somerset 2011).

A recent Education Sector Performance Review report from Malawi cited a 1985 World Bank study and its quantitative definition of education quality, defined as “the level of material inputs allocated per pupil and the level of efficiency with which fixed amounts of material inputs are organized and managed to raise pupil achievement” (cited in Government of Malawi 2016:25).

I would argue that reference to a homogenous quantitative approach to understanding quality risks mixing up too many different issues and may contribute to the problems associated with conflating a single input or output indicator with quality. Whilst a strong case can be made to use proxy indicators for quality, particularly in terms of learning achievement given its association with wider benefits that accrue both to the individual and society (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008; Hawkes and Ugur 2012), there is scope for further research and exploration of how to measure the multi-faceted and unobservable latent concept of educational quality. For discussion of quantitative approaches to the measurement of latent variables and issues of construct validity³, see Bartholomew et al. (2008) and Cronbach and Meehl (1955).

Qualitative perspectives

The qualitative perspective on education quality shifts the emphasis from measurable input or output to a greater concern for the harder to measure aspects of process and context. Although few would dispute the importance of ‘placing teaching and learning at the heart of education’ (Sayed and Ahmed 2015) and central to an understanding of education quality, Alexander (2015) questions how realistic it is to attempt to incorporate judgements of the processes of pedagogy into any macro-level evaluation of quality. There is no common understanding on what the indicators of high-quality pedagogy should be.

How, for example, should a lesson based on student-centred approaches be judged against another lesson, controlled by the teacher and based on traditional methods of ‘talk and chalk’? The former lesson may, perhaps, be more enjoyable for the pupils; but in the overcrowded, under resourced classroom typical of many schools in low-income countries, the more traditional approach will often be more successful in bringing about effective learning.

Given these complexities, it is understandable that educational practitioners rely predominantly on more easily quantifiable input and output indicators, rather than

³ In a technical sense, construct validity here refers to the degree to which a measure reflects accurately the variability among objects as they are arrayed on the underlying (latent) continuum to which the construct refers (Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Sechrest 2005). Put more simply, it refers to the extent to which the construct (e.g. test score) measures what it purports to measure (e.g. education quality).

process, in making judgements on quality. Process factors are harder to measure and lend themselves to micro-level study rather than a broader and more objective macro study.

Shaeffer (1995) locates the discussion on quality in the context of decentralisation and participation. Increased participation through decentralisation allows for formerly marginalised peoples to gain knowledge and means to decide priorities, improve skills and meet their own needs (Shaeffer 1995:54). With some similarities to the work of Paulo Freire (2000), he argues that quality should be defined by the extent to which it mobilises people through the development of knowledge, skills and values supportive of more participatory processes. In a study of education quality in Malawi, Chimombo (2005:168) suggests that 'educational quality requires relevance to local needs, adaptability to local conditions, and flexibility in addressing cultural obstacles'.

These democratic aspects of quality are developed by Tikly and Barrett (2011) who suggest that they allow quality to be a contested concept, changing over time and across context. There is no answer to the question what is education quality but rather each perspective offers a different approach to the concept, each with its strengths and weaknesses.

Public perceptions of education quality are equally contested.⁴ The reality for many people, according to some research, is a notion of education quality defined by national examinations or admission to secondary school (Serpell 1999; Sifuna and Sawamura 2010). This suggests the value people place on education's instrumental role as a means for progression to higher levels of education and into the workplace.

Data from the Young Lives study in India, however, suggest the dominance of national exams as an indicator of quality is contested (Mbiti 2016). Head teachers in India believe that the most important indicators of good schools are observable inputs such as buildings, geographical accessibility, and the availability of teaching materials. Only eleven per cent of head teachers believe that learning outcomes and exam results are the most important indicator of a good school (Mbiti 2016).

In one of the first attempts to theorise an understanding of education in a developing country context, Beeby (1966) draws attention to the emphasis on 'quantity' issues in

⁴ See, for example, Mooney et al. (2003) for a discussion on perceptions of quality by different stakeholders in the English pre-school context.

education in the 1950s and 1960s with large numbers of children out of school and illiterate parents demanding more (rather than better) schooling. He suggests that ‘an attempt to arrive at a definition of “quality” in education would probably do more harm than good’ (Beeby 1966:10) but that it is still important to describe the limits within which the term is used.

Beeby (1966) conceptualised quality at three levels. At the simplest level, classroom quality as seen by an inspector of schools and concerned with the acquisition of measurable knowledge as well as the harder to measure behaviours and attitudes. Second, education should serve the economic goals of the community in which learners live. Third, and related, judgements of quality are also made against broader social criteria.

Building on Beeby, Hawes and Stephens (1990:11) conceptualise quality as having three strands: efficiency in meeting a set of goals, relevance to human and environment needs and providing ‘something more’ in pursuit of human betterment. Like Beeby’s third level, the ‘something more’ suggests a degree of abstraction that is difficult to pin down and understand in an objective sense. Measurement at this level is less straightforward than in the technical, quantitative conceptualisations of quality. It is certainly easier to measure quality in terms of teacher qualifications, school infrastructure and exam results than it is to identify what a quality education may contribute to human fulfilment.

Bringing Quantitative and Qualitative perspectives together

In an attempt to reconcile a quantitative, objective conceptualisation of quality with the qualitative, subjective approach, Tanner et al. (2006), in the context of early years’ services in the UK, suggest the notion of a ‘quality continuum’ that can encapsulate both a more top-down static concept with a stakeholder-led perception and understanding of quality. The authors do not reject either perspective, both acknowledging the importance of measurable standards and targets, as well as emphasising quality as a process and therefore legitimately defined by those involved in the service.

This continuum suggests a possible way forward for the inclusion of different perspectives on quality into one study. It also offers scope to combine a measure of progress against a basic minimum level of service provision defined against quantitative indicators with higher level, more abstract notions of quality. Quantitative indicators and

the claims of greater transparency and external validity⁵ could be complemented by a nuanced local understanding of quality, using qualitative research methods to uncover contextual meaning.

2.1.2. International policy discourse: a focus on learning

Central to the policy discourse on a successor agreement to the Millennium Development Framework prior to 2015, was an appreciation that a greater focus on education quality, as construed in terms of measurable outcomes, was required. Significant progress had been made on access to primary education since the Millennium Declaration in 2000 and yet data suggested that levels of cognitive achievement remained low and recent progress for the most marginalised children had also stalled (see Chapter 1). While physical access to a cycle of basic education is important, it is a limited and narrow goal for any society (Sayed 2011).

The need to shift from a focus on measurable output indicators of schooling (e.g. enrolment and completion of school) to monitoring the outcomes of learning achievement was argued by Filmer and co-authors (2006). Calling for a Millennium Learning Goal, their study cited countries that were on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal for universal primary school completion (e.g. Brazil and Mexico) but a long way from ensuring that children would achieve even minimal competency levels in maths.

In his book, *The Rebirth of Education*, Pritchett (2013) draws a distinction between ‘schooling’ and ‘education’ goals and between systems of education set up to facilitate children’s universal access to school as opposed to universal access to improved learning outcomes in schools. The goal of basic education, according to Pritchett (2013), is to equip children with the foundational skills, abilities, knowledge, cultural understandings, and values they will need to successfully participate in their family, society, polity, and economy. Schooling, he argues, is not the same as education (Pritchett 2013).

In response to Filmer et al. (2006), Barrett (2011) recognised the role a Millennium Learning Goal could play in ensuring equal opportunity to achieve learning outcomes but cautions that a focus on learning outcomes could result in high stakes tests and be

⁵ I use external validity to refer to the generalisability of the research findings beyond the context of the research.

detrimental to the achievement of goals that are not readily measurable. Barrett (2011) therefore made the case for a process goal with qualitative targets for the assessment of learning which she argued would be more appropriate and more likely to improve education quality.

In response to both the academic and policy discourse, a transition from an emphasis on access to education to a focus on education quality and learning outcomes is now in progress. As noted in Chapter 1, while the Millennium Development Goal on education emphasised enrolment, the new Sustainable Development Goal on education shifts focus. The language in the goal itself commits the world to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (UN General Assembly 2015). The first of ten targets underpinning the goal suggests that the purpose of access to equitable and quality primary and secondary education is the attainment of relevant and effective learning outcomes:

By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes. (UN General Assembly 2015)

This focus on learning outcomes restricts an understanding of education quality to a narrow, measurable dimension. For international donor agencies supporting education globally, such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the narrow focus is intentional. Berry et al. (2015:324) argue that the aim for DFID is to sharpen the focus of its support, to be transparent to UK taxpayers about the results it is seeking to achieve, and to generate political interest in learning outcomes internationally. To this end, DFID is seeking to promote a concept of learning that is defined as ‘a vital and measurable dimension of a quality education’ (DFID 2013:4). Since launching its education strategy in 2011, USAID has focused narrowly on a learning target that seeks to support 100 million children with improved reading skills in the early grades of primary school (USAID 2011).

Some would argue that such narrow approaches to an understanding or operationalisation of education quality unnecessarily restricts the policy space within which governments need to devise policy solutions for diverse and deeply contextual challenges (Clemens and Moss 2005; Easterly 2009). Others argue that global goals and their attendant simplified frameworks are a useful way to harmonize efforts and make progress on

particular issues (Vandemoortele 2009; Kenny and Sumner 2011). Rose (2015:189) argues that ‘goals can be used to hold governments to account for reaching those who often do not have a voice’.

When one considers the indicators chosen to track the primary and secondary education target, the focus on a narrow set of measurable learning outcomes that are considered proxies for equitable and quality primary and secondary education becomes clearer. Attention is paid to achieved proficiency levels in only reading and mathematics in primary and secondary education.⁶ These indicators represent the only clue as to what the Sustainable Development Goal on education means by “relevant” learning outcomes.

Whilst one could argue the case that a focus on reading and mathematics is appropriate in terms of a minimum threshold and a means to avert the crisis in primary education (Hawes and Stephens 1990), there are clearly learning outcomes that could be conceived of as relevant that go beyond this narrow scope. These could include students’ ability to demonstrate psychosocial and non-cognitive skills or changes in students’ aspirations, attitudes (such as increased appreciation of diverse perspectives) and behaviours (such as the adoption of safe sex practices) (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). Alexander (2015:254) goes further to challenge the received view that literacy and numeracy are and forever should remain the sole ‘basics’ of education, ‘regardless of time, location, culture or national circumstance’.

The increasing centrality of learning is seen by some researchers as a major shift in the architecture of international goals (see, for example, Barrett et al. 2015). The conflation of quality education with a limited set of measurable learning outcomes may indeed reify the practice of education as Sayed (1997) argues and lead to a reductionism implicit in equating learning with the results of standardized tests. Indeed, Barrett et al. (2015:236) note that much of the research and debates surrounding the development of a new global focus on learning ‘have roots in the global North’. They go on to suggest that there is little point in an ‘international community’ mainly located in the global North monitoring

⁶ Proportion of children and young people: (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex (UN General Assembly 2015).

learning if that information is not being interpreted and informing policy and practice within education systems (Barrett et al. 2015:236).

What can be measured is privileged in policy circles over what cannot. In his study on Malawi, Chimombo (2005:170) argues that ‘since the problem of quality is invisible, politicians can claim that Free Primary Education has achieved its goals’. It is perhaps for this reason that measurability is a key accountability mechanism for international frameworks (Rose 2015). Yet for both Schweisfurth (2015) and Alexander (2015), there is a deep sense of frustration at the preoccupation with measurable inputs and outcomes at the expense of pedagogy. Classrooms are the true front line in the quest for educational quality (Alexander 2015:257) within which the process of teaching and learning (pedagogy) is central.

A quantitative perspective of education quality focused on the achievement of relevant learning outcomes has now become the dominant theme within international policy discourse. While tensions remain as to what constitutes relevant learning outcomes and how these should be measured, the international discourse is now reflected in a growing body of literature on ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes with little consideration for the multifaceted nature of education quality.

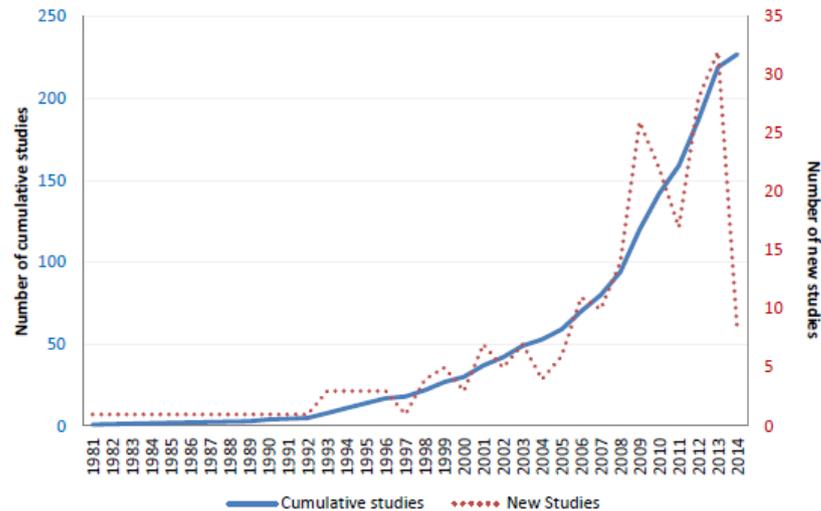
2.1.3. ‘What works’ to improve learning outcomes

The greatest number of these studies have built on the quantitative approach pioneered by Coleman et al. (1966), with increasing numbers of experimental and quasi-experimental studies that seek to test combinations of inputs (e.g. textbooks, class size) and their causal relationship with changes in learning outcomes. The purpose of this section is to provide an overview of this body of literature and suggest where gaps and challenges may lie before looking in more detail at the literature to date that explores the relationship between decentralisation and education quality (section 2.2.7).

In an effort to make sense of the rapid growth in studies aimed at understanding ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes (see Figure 1), researchers have recently undertaken systematic reviews of the many impact evaluation studies. These systematic reviews come in different forms. They include quantitative meta-analyses that convert the results of all the included studies to standardised point estimates within categories of intervention

(e.g. pedagogical interventions) as well as narrative reviews that examine qualitative evidence (Evans and Popova 2016; Snilstveit et al. 2015).

Figure 1 Distribution of studies on learning over time



Source: Evans and Popova (2016)

Evans and Popova (2016) analyse six of these systematic reviews conducted in 2013 and 2014. Between them, they review 301 studies from across the developing world: 227 of the studies report learning outcomes, and 152 report enrolment or attendance outcomes. The authors find that the reviews vary extensively in the number of studies incorporated in each review and the official inclusion criteria. What is striking is the limited overlap in studies across the reviews despite all of them including, at a minimum, randomised controlled trials, primary school outcomes, studies in sub-Saharan Africa and studies released between 1990 and 2010. Almost three quarters of all the learning studies across the six reviews are included in only one of the six reviews.

The conclusions from the Evans and Popova review of reviews suggests that there is more behind the variation in the composition of studies in each review than the systematic inclusion decisions alone (Evans and Popova 2016). The result is that these so-called systematic reviews fall short of exhaustive coverage and therefore reach varying and sometimes divergent conclusions. While the authors do establish interventions that work well to improve learning outcomes, it is more difficult to establish what works best and,

in all cases, it is of critical importance to understand *under what circumstances* the various interventions work well.

In a more recent review of field experiments in education in developing countries, Muralidharan (2017) cites nine systematic reviews of education in developing countries between 2013 and 2016.⁷ From these reviews, there is a growing convergence on certain categories of intervention that are associated with improvements in learning outcomes *under certain conditions* and a recognition that a considerable amount of education research has aimed to study the impacts of school and student inputs (including textbooks, learning materials, infrastructure, teacher salaries) on school participation (enrolment and attendance rates) and learning outcomes (see Glewwe and Muralidharan 2016 for a review of this research).

While school and student inputs account for the majority of education expenditure in countries studied, interventions focused on the teaching and learning process (or pedagogy) are amongst those that appear to produce the largest effect sizes on learning outcomes (Evans and Popova 2016; Muralidharan 2017). These include programmes that support teachers to teach at the level of students' learning (Duflo et al. 2015; Banerjee et al. 2016) and the use of computer-aided learning programmes (Banerjee et al. 2007; Lai et al. 2015; Yang et al. 2013).

Governance or accountability related programmes are another category of intervention reviewed, including strategies to reduce teacher absenteeism, introduce teacher performance incentives as well as programmes associated with decentralisation (discussed in section 2.2.7).

The relationship between school leadership⁸ and learning outcomes is not well represented in the systematic reviews referenced above despite international literature identifying effective school leadership as a critical factor for raising the achievement of learners (Leithwood et al. 2004; Ngcobo and Tikly 2008). Although there is some literature on this relationship in low income settings, it tends to be qualitative and to focus

⁷ Muralidharan 2013; Glewwe et al. 2014 (focused on school inputs); Kremer et al. 2013; Krishnaratne et al. 2013; Conn 2014 (focused on sub-Saharan Africa); McEwan 2014; Ganimian and Murnane (2016); Evans and Popova (2016); and Glewwe and Muralidharan (2016).

⁸ School leadership here refers primarily to the role of head teachers unless specified otherwise.

on broader themes such as school management and governance rather than the specific role of a head teacher.

Central to most definitions of leadership is that it involves a process of intentional influence on other people's attitudes, motivations and behaviours (Bush and Glover 2003). The impact of school leaders on student outcomes is mediated by changes in classroom practices; the role, therefore, of a school leader is to shape the internal processes and pedagogies that result in improved pupil outcomes (Pont et al. 2008; Day et al. 2010).

Beyond the classroom, research from developing countries shows that school leaders act as intermediaries between the school, the community and the wider education system (Ngcobo and Tikly 2008), adapting schools to changing external environments, and mediating between internal school improvement processes and externally initiated reform (Onderi and Croll 2008).

A school leader's decision-making power and control over resources, depends on the level of autonomy⁹ granted to schools within an education system (Hanushek et al. 2013). A survey of OECD education systems notes a trend towards greater autonomy at school level, with more accountability given to school leaders for outcomes (Pont et al. 2008). In a policy report, Mourshed et al. (2010) argue that school autonomy may be more appropriate for fast improving education systems, while poor performing systems may benefit from more centralised accountability. However, there is some evidence from analysis of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) data that increased school autonomy can encourage better student performance where there is a strong accountability mechanism (e.g. standardised assessments or exit exam) (Fuchs and Woessmann 2004).

2.1.4. Defining education quality

While the concept of education quality remains contested and multifaceted, two broad categorising techniques can help define approaches to its conceptualisation. Qualitative approaches focus on process, participation and the scope for multiple definitions while

⁹ To note, school autonomy can vary in degree and scope as discussed in the following section on decentralisation. See also, for example, West et al. (2010) for further discussion on school autonomy.

quantitative approaches are defined through measurement and increasingly focus on learning achievement as the main criterion to assess education quality. Researchers tend to approach education quality from one perspective or the other, particularly when it comes to empirical research. However, as discussed in section 2.2.1, there is an example of analysing education quality as a continuum, reconciling a quantitative, objective conceptualisation of quality with a more qualitative, stakeholder-led approach in the same study (Tanner et al. 2006).

In line with the new Sustainable Development Goal on education, international policy discourse privileges “relevant and effective learning outcomes” as the defining features of a quality education (UN 2015:14). Policy discourse is reflected in a fast-growing body of empirical research that strives to understand ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes. Whilst this literature contributes to an understanding of policies and interventions that can improve learning outcomes, it also highlights the importance of understanding the circumstances in which various interventions are working well or not.

I define education quality as a multi-layered concept. At its foundation is a basic level of minimum learning outcomes that should be attained irrespective of circumstance. These minimum learning outcomes include the foundational skills of basic literacy and numeracy that enable people to lead healthier, more productive and fulfilling lives (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008; Hawkes and Ugur 2012). With over 250 million children not able to read basic sentences and do basic maths (UNESCO 2014), the achievement of a basic level of minimum learning outcomes is a necessary condition of a quality education. Beyond these foundations, there are many more facets of “education quality” that go beyond this narrow scope; these may be defined to meet the needs and aspirations of different peoples, varying across both context and time.

While there is an evident need to make progress in basic levels of literacy and mathematics, particularly in low income countries, I argue that there is also a need to understand whether or not ‘understanding education quality’ may play an important role in this progress. There is no consideration given within the existing empirical literature of how different perspectives on education quality may or may not impact on the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve education quality. Exploring these ideas within the context of decentralisation reform in Malawi is the purpose of this thesis.

2.2. DECENTRALISATION

Decentralisation has been a major concern both in developed and developing countries for at least the past three decades. Whilst the evidence surrounding decentralisation is mixed, governments have continued to pursue it as a priority reform.¹⁰ Defining decentralisation is not straightforward; the term broadly refers to shifts in the location of decision-making or power to different authorities in different contexts.

This section starts by considering the different approaches to education decentralisation together with the expected positive outcomes on education service delivery and the pitfalls. To probe further into the pathways through which decentralisation is expected to impact on education quality, I focus on two concepts, cited in the literature as central to this link: participation and accountability. I then consider the use of a principal-agent framework to support an understanding of the relationships between different levels of government, schools, teachers and communities.

The rationale for decentralisation reform in developing country contexts is then considered, including its links to the ‘good governance’ agenda and the associated challenges with how many African states currently operate based on their pre- and post-colonial governance experience and under the influence of certain international donors. The section ends with a review of the empirical literature that explores the relationship between decentralisation and education quality.

2.2.1. Education decentralisation: forms, benefits and disadvantages

Decentralisation refers to the re-distribution of powers and functions from central to the local levels of a government system. However, the precise definition is a matter of dispute among scholars and practitioners. This is because existing decentralisation takes a variety of forms regarding what is re-distributed and what levels are involved (see for instance Govinda 1997 on cases from South Asia). Researchers have attempted to classify these forms of decentralisation with a view to developing a theoretical framework for describing decentralisation.

¹⁰ According to Faguet and Pöschl (2015:2), in 2000, the World Bank estimated that between 80 and 100 per cent of the world’s countries were experimenting with some form of decentralisation.

Four principal modes of decentralisation are defined in the literature (Rondinelli et al. 1983; Bray 1999; McGinn and Welsh 1999).

1. Deconcentration describes a shift in the responsibility from the centre to a region for the implementation of rules but not for making them; an effort to reduce the concentration of workload at the centre.
2. Delegation suggests a transfer of decision-making responsibility from the centre to central government representatives at a subnational level.
3. Devolution describes the wholesale transfer of decision-making authority to a local government, which is strengthened with financial and legal autonomy.
4. Privatisation re-distributes government responsibility to voluntary organisations or private enterprises.

Educational decentralisation may take into account a number of aspects in the education system, including the organisation of instruction, personnel management, the construction of school buildings, evaluation methods, and resource allocation (Burki et al. 1999). The degree of decentralisation generally varies in each of these aspects.

‘School-based management’ and ‘school self-management’ are two terms that describe an increasingly popular policy that seeks to allow schools to do more of their own decision-making (de Grauwe 2004).¹¹ The concept is broadly defined by Caldwell:

School-based management is the systematic decentralisation to the school level of authority and responsibility to make decisions on significant matters related to school operations within a centrally determined framework of goals, policies, curriculum, standards, and accountability (Caldwell 2005:1).

Decentralisation means different things in different places. It is therefore important to understand the specifics of the model for each context as well as the difference between intention and implementation. As Gunnarsson et al. (2004:5) noted in their analysis of the impacts of local autonomy and community participation on student learning in ten Latin American countries, ‘[A] considerable degree of variation exists between the level of

¹¹ Examples of these types of reform include Charter Schools in the U.S., Academies in the UK as well as various efforts to enable schools to take on increasing levels of responsibility in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bruns et al 2011).

decentralisation and autonomy stipulated and codified in a given norm or law (*de jure* autonomy) and what actually occurs in schools (*de facto* autonomy)'. The distinction between policy intent and actual implementation regarding decentralisation reform is seldom explored (see Chapter 3, section 3.4.1 for further discussion).

Whatever the form pursued, educational decentralisation is expected to stimulate improved education quality through one or more of the following channels:

1. Increasing the quantity and quality of inputs.
2. Increasing the relevance of programmes.
3. Facilitating citizen participation in decision-making.
4. Greater efficiency in the allocation and use of resources.
5. Efficient use of local information through reduced transaction costs.
6. Shifting the structure of accountability to local constituents.
7. Benefits for both central and local governments through the redistribution of political power and burden-sharing.

(See: Colletta and Perkins 1995; Francis and James 2003; Mehrotra 2005; Faguet and Sanchez 2008; Bruns et al. 2011).

These intended outcomes are by no means always realised. Negative consequences include: increased inequalities between regions due to differential local capacity, problems associated with fragmentation and instability, corruption and the questionable effectiveness of reform in a context of limited resources (Manor 1999; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005; Galiani et al. 2008).

Echoing Montero and Samuels (2004), Geo-Jaja (2004:311) adds a word of caution: 'The grim reality is that the depth and ultimately, the outcome of decentralisation reforms depends on the motives, the political commitment, and the centrality of the state in the funding and distribution of resources to education'. Central government is also an integral part of Tendler's (1997) analysis of a decentralised health worker programme in Brazil, whereby the central government as 'enabling bystander' played an important role to foster

mutually beneficial relations and networks between central government, local government and civil society.

The State's public information campaigns and exhortations to citizens to monitor and respect the public service were the most conspicuous examples of government's inducing of civic action. (Tendler 1997:151-152)

Even in a context of strong political and financial commitment from the state, the success of decentralisation is not assured. The process of political and administrative restructuring does not necessarily entail a change in working practice (Fullan 1993). To 'restructure is not to reculture' and changing the norms, values, skills and beliefs of a state bureaucracy is unlikely to be achieved with the passing of decentralisation reform (Fullan 1993:49). Furthermore, Bullock and Thomas (2002) suggest that too little attention is given to teaching and learning within decentralisation policy with the result that policymakers have 'washed over and around children in classrooms, leaving their day-to-day experiences largely untouched' (Bullock and Thomas 2002:219).

2.2.2. Mechanisms: participation

Any conceptualisation of decentralisation entails implications for citizen participation. In education, this tends to relate to the parents or guardians of pupils. Participation is a key word in the development mantra but one whose meanings and purposes are the subject of much debate. There is a common assumption that it is a good thing (Cleaver 1999) and yet it is associated with problems concerning misrepresentation, the 'myth' of community, the misperception that voice equals power and the exclusion of women (see: Arnstein 1969; Chambers 1995; Guijt and Shah 1998; White 2000; Bray 2001; Cleaver 2001; Bray 2003).

There is a difference between going through the ritual of participation and having the real power to affect the outcome of a process (Bray 2001). Arnstein (1969:217) drew up a ladder of citizen participation that ranges from 'manipulation' (a form of non-participation) to 'citizen control', passing through stages of 'informing', 'consultation' and 'placation' as varying degrees of tokenism.

Participation and *involvement*, according to Bray, are weak forms of activity; 'partnership implies more active and committed involvement' (2001:5). For instance,

attending a public hearing for a plan of school construction is one way to participate, yet it does not necessarily mean the person participates in making decisions about the plan. Rose (2003b) draws a distinction between “genuine” and “pseudo-participation”, highlighting that the degree of participation can vary between communities as well as by different members within communities.

Through an analysis of SACMEQ III data in Malawi, Barnett (2013) shows that community involvement explains a limited degree of variation in pupil reading and maths scores. The data also suggest that community involvement can be better understood by breaking it down into three modes: ‘financing’ (in-kind or financial contributions), ‘networking’ (participation in school governance and planning) and ‘learner support’ (oversight and support of pupils’ school and homework).

Participation is central to the framework developed by Barrera-Osorio et al. (2009) for understanding the spectrum of school-based management reform. To understand the channels through which school-based management may affect the education process, it is important to understand what decisions are devolved to the school level, who gets the decision-making power and the extent to which accountability relations are strengthened through enhanced participation and transparency in decision-making processes.

Blair (2000) argues that participation will hold decentralised institutions more responsive and accountable. Whatever the normative position adopted regarding participation, decentralisation enhances the scope for citizen involvement which could facilitate improved accountability and enhance the responsiveness of the school to its community.

2.2.3. Mechanisms: accountability

Accountability is cited as one of the central mechanisms that link decentralisation to the improved delivery of basic social services (see, for example: Paul 1992; Carnoy 1999; Devas and Grant 2003; World Bank 2003; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011). The meaning of accountability, however, is also contested.

Sometimes accountability is equated to responsibility (Paul 1992), treated as a form of responsibility (Bovens 1998), or considered to subsume concepts of answerability and responsibility (Elster 1999). It is not my intention to draw up a single definition of

accountability. Rather, I try to construct a broad picture of the concept of accountability before considering how it can be used analytically within a principal-agent framework.

Defining accountability as ‘holding individuals and organisations responsible for performance measured as objectively as possible’, Paul (1992:1047) focuses on exit, voice and control as strategies for ensuring effective accountability. He argues that performance can improve by moving away from an exclusive reliance on control mechanisms such as hierarchical monitoring and use of organisational incentives to a system that uses ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ mechanisms in conjunction with control.

This conceptualisation builds on the work of Hirschman (1970) who theorised the concepts of ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ as ways of expressing dissatisfaction toward an organisation by its members. His explanation is based on consumer reactions when faced with deterioration in quality of the goods or service they purchase. One way is to stop buying the product and change to another. This behaviour of defection is called exit. Another possible reaction is for users to directly articulate their views to the producer or service provider. This is called voice, a political mechanism for expressing one’s view.

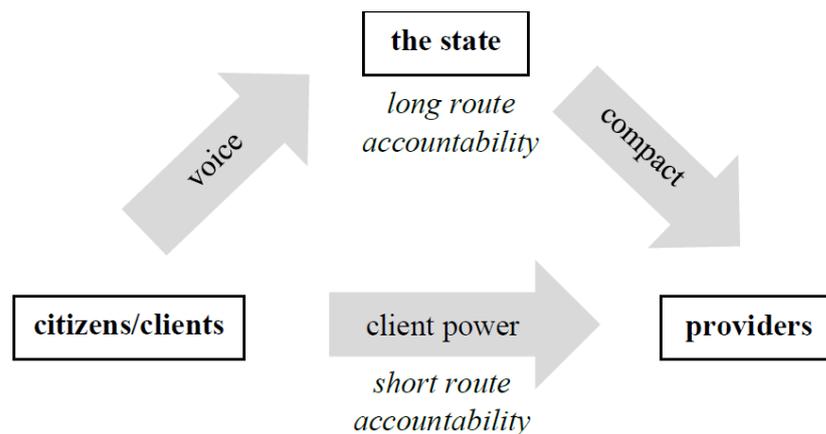
Whether one uses voice or resorts to exit is largely determined by the type of the service/goods and the legal, spatial, social, and economic characteristics of the public (Paul 1992). Most importantly, exit works effectively only when there is access to alternatives, which in the context of rural primary education in sub-Saharan Africa is rare.

West et al. (2011) review the literature on accountability in the English education policy context and provide a useful framework for understanding the different types of accountability that may operate within an education system. The type of accountability is differentiated on the grounds of who is accountable, to whom and for what. The mechanisms for ensuring the accountability and the associated sanctions are then presented against each type. Although in a developed country context, this framework is instructive to understand the features of accountability relationships and to inform the development of research tools and analysis for this thesis.

A central theme of the 2004 World Development Report (World Bank 2003) is the importance of accountability to improve the provision of basic (education) services with increased decentralisation cited as a key policy to achieve such an end. The report cites high rates of teacher absenteeism, leakages of financial transfers to schools, ineffective

school monitoring systems and poor parental engagement. The report suggests that these are symptomatic of low levels of accountability in the system. The ‘accountability triangle’ presented in Figure 2 and drawn from the 2004 World Development Report has since become an important analytical tool for policy and research on decentralisation and education in developing countries.¹²

Figure 2 Accountability triangle from the 2004 World Development Report



Source: adapted from World Bank (2003)

In principle, parents (and children) should hold government accountable for education service delivery. However, due to the centralised structure of the (public) education system and the nature of the political economy in developing countries (see discussion that follows on governance in section 2.2.6), it is difficult for parents to hold the state accountable through voting (long-route accountability) or through direct action against public education service providers (short-route accountability).

2.2.4. Principal-agent framework

Figure 2 depicts an oversimplified set of relations between the main institutions or actors within an education system.¹³ One way to analyse the relationship between these different

¹² Most recently, the focus on accountability as a central element of a well-functioning education system is picked up and developed in the 2018 World Development Report on education – *Learning to Realise Education’s Promise* - and the 2017 Global Education Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2017) – *Accountability: Meeting Our Commitments*.

¹³ Pritchett (2015) suggests there are four sets of actors which any description of an education system must have: citizens/parents/students; the central state; schools; and teachers, whom Pritchett (2015) considers as the ‘front-line service providers’.

institutions is to use a principal-agent framework. The use of this framework helps us to better understand the complexity of relationships and the importance of accountability, alignment and coherence within a decentralised system.

The principal can be understood as an institution with objectives, with agents needed to implement activities to achieve these objectives. However, the agents, although they may share some of the principal's objectives 'also have other (usually self-regarding) interests, such as increasing their own income... Agents also have more information about what they are doing than does the principal, giving them an advantage which could allow them to pursue their own interests.' (Bossert 1998:1516).

An important aspect when there is some form of decentralisation to schools is that 'there are mechanisms, such as incentives and regulations to ensure that the school acts responsibly in its delegated role' (Ferris 1992:333). As Besley and Ghatak argue:

The accountability structure defines the rules of the game... As in all such relationships, there are informational asymmetries and monitoring problems, and inducing agents to act according to the objectives and coordinating the activities of these various actors are the key issues of organisational design (2003:238).

The economic literature suggests that long route accountability (Figure 2) presents a series of principal-agent problems between the beneficiaries or principals of education service delivery (parents/students/citizens) and the agents (frontline providers/teachers) (Bruns et al. 2011). At a first stage, citizens hold the state accountable using their voice and votes, through a political process. In a second step, the state (another principal) holds providers (schools and teachers) accountable for their behaviours and results through a 'compact' or managerial relationship.¹⁴

Short-route accountability, on the other hand, runs directly from users to front-line providers. This has an important role to play in the context of slow and often ineffectual political process and bureaucracy that underpin long route accountability. Furthermore, citizens may lack the voice or the political clout to hold politicians accountable through electoral processes. The theory therefore suggests that policy should aim to strengthen

¹⁴ This relationship could also be understood in terms of *hierarchical* accountability with the providers accountable to the state for their performance/agreed 'compact'; in Figure 2, the direction of the arrow indicates states holding providers to account.

short route accountability by bringing service users closer to their providers (schools) and enable them to demand improved services and hold the providers to account.

Two further challenges relating to principal-agent relationships in education are worth exploring a little further as they take us closer to the relationship between education quality and decentralisation: measurability and multiple principals.

As noted in the sections above on education quality, the objectives of education can be somewhat imprecise. This means that it can be hard to find good performance measures which makes structuring performance incentives difficult. It also poses a challenge to parents; as Banerji (2014) notes:

Parents can easily discuss issues of access to schooling and debate and argue about inputs and entitlements that their children are supposed to receive as a result of going to school. But discussions focused on learning are neither easy nor automatic.

If parents demand “quality education” on the one hand and the state strives to deliver “quality education” on the other, a lack of a commonly understood definition or measurement is likely to weaken accountability pressures through the education system.

Public services typically involve multiple principals (Besley and Ghatak 2003). The behaviour of teachers (agents) may affect principals in different ways and shed light on the potential for a misalignment of incentives. Head teachers who demand high grades for their students in public exams may expect teachers to teach to the test irrespective of the effects on critical thinking and co-curricular activities. Parents, on the other hand, may be more interested in their children fulfilling their potential in areas which may not be related to public exams (for example in music, sports or vocational skills). As Besley and Ghatak (2003:240) argue, ‘each principal dilutes the incentives offered by other principals, making the agent’s incentives less high powered’.

Pritchett’s recent theoretical work on ‘coherence’ and ‘alignment’ is related. Pritchett (2015:8) argues that the low level of learning outcomes observed across many developing countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, is because these education systems were never designed (or emerged) as systems *coherent* to the purpose of producing uniformly

high learning outcomes.¹⁵ Instead, these same education systems have been coherent around the goal of increasing participation in school.

The growing number of interventions and policies that are proven to improve learning outcomes in some, often well-functioning systems, does not mean the causal explanation of poor performance in a given country is a lack of these same interventions or policies, argues Pritchett (2015).

Building on the ‘accountability triangle’ (Figure 2), and similar to what Besley and Ghatak (2003) describe as a (mis)alignment of incentives, Pritchett develops the concept of ‘coherence’ as a means to understand and evaluate the accountability relationships within an education system. Pritchett (2015) goes as far as to suggest that the difference in the coherence of accountability relationships across systems may account for the differences in learning outcomes observed both within and between systems.

These ideas of ‘(in)coherence’ and ‘(mis)alignment of incentives’ are ones that I will develop and explore further as I look at the interrelationship between how people understand education quality and how education decentralisation works in practice. There is no empirical literature to date that I am aware of that explores the relationship between decentralisation reform and education quality from this perspective.

2.2.5. School-based management reform

Four principal modes of education decentralisation are defined in the literature from deconcentration that implies a shift in responsibility rather than decision-making power to devolution that describes the wholesale transfer of decision-making responsibility from central to local government. Increasingly pursued in education, school-based management reform describes a shift in responsibility to the school level for decisions and resources that affect school improvement (Caldwell 2005).

¹⁵ Pritchett’s work underpins much of the core arguments within the 2018 World Development Report on education which argues for policy to focus more clearly on coherence and alignment within education systems. Core to Pritchett’s argument is that while most education systems in developing countries are well organised to provide access to school for most students, and the accountability flows within system are aligned to that end, a shift in accountability flows is required to produce the type and scale of learning outcomes that will lead to individual and societal benefit from education. Access oriented systems are relatively easy to organise, but *coherence* towards learning is a more multidimensional task. See also Andrews et al. (2017).

2. Literature: education quality & decentralisation

The decisions devolved to the school can be financial, managerial or related to the curriculum and pedagogy. In order to support participation in decision-making and to strengthen accountability, many models also involve some means of providing information to community members on the performance of an individual school (or school district) relative to other schools (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009).

Leithwood and Menzies (1998) categorise school-based management according to the source of control: administrative control by principal, professional control by teachers, community control by parents and community members, and balanced control shared by parents and teachers. This echoes a similar categorisation of the decentralisation of education governance according to the location of legitimacy, including political legitimacy and professional expertise (McGinn and Welsh 1999).

Devolving decision-making to the level of the school through school-based management reform does not lead directly to improved outcomes but instead is likely to impact on outcomes via a number of causal pathways, as follows.

Drawing on the discussion of participation and accountability, reforms that increase accountability and responsiveness to local needs are assumed to lead to positive stakeholder perceptions of (and engagement in) educational provision (Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009; Bruns et al. 2011), which, in turn, is expected to increase enrolment, attendance and retention and to reduce corruption within schools (Colletta and Perkins 1995; Blair 2000; Gertler et al. 2012; Beasley and Huillery 2016). It is also presumed that increased accountability will encourage schools to make recruitment decisions on the basis of teacher performance, rather than mechanically relying on qualifications or allowing for nepotism to interfere (Duflo et al. 2011; Bold et al 2013). Such personnel practices, in turn, are seen to lead to reduced teacher absenteeism, increased teacher motivation and, ultimately, improvements in the quality of teaching within schools (Duflo et al. 2011).

It is also assumed that local communities will encourage schools to adopt more locally relevant curricula, which can then have a positive impact on the quality of teaching and student opportunities to learn (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). At the same time, decentralised funding mechanisms and other reforms aimed at increasing efficiency within schools, particularly when combined with efforts to increase community participation, are presumed to result in more resources being available to schools, another important factor in improving educational quality (Das et al. 2011; Barnett 2013; Krishnaratne et al. 2013).

Increased efficiency is, in turn, assumed to affect the unit costs of educational provision, potentially reducing costs or improving outcomes for a given cost, which may be particularly valued by governments in less well-resourced settings.

We might therefore expect that school-based management reform will result in a number of 'intermediate' outcomes, in addition to an overall contribution to improved learning outcomes. These 'intermediate' outcomes could include increased enrolment, improved equality of access, improved attendance, and reduced drop out (Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

While theory and empirical evidence suggests that education decentralisation can lead to positive impacts by increasing inputs, relevance and the efficiency of education programmes, it also has drawbacks. These include increased inequalities due to differential local capacity, corruption and challenges associated with fragmentation (Manor 1999; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005). For example, school-based management reform may lead to elite capture at the local level or may limit educational opportunity for marginalised ethnic groups (Galiani et al. 2008).

Critically, those vested with the authority to make decisions on behalf of the school must also have the capacity and knowledge to make such decisions, or their decisions are unlikely to have a positive impact on outcomes (World Bank 2004). The body of evidence reviewed in the 2004 World Development Report on decentralisation highlights the complex inter-relationships and interactions between formal structures of decision-making and informal structures of power and authority within bureaucracies, communities and schools (World Bank 2004).

In shifting decision-making authority to the school-level and through providing resources to implement the decisions made, school-based management can be understood as an approach to operationalising the short-route of accountability described in section 2.2.3. Its success will then depend on a number of assumptions which must be met in order for school-based management to have its desired effect. For example, the assertion that involving parents and community members in the hiring and firing of teachers (an 'accountability' mechanism) will improve quality of teaching rests on the assumption that (a) parents and community members will be able to identify high quality teachers who should be retained and/or rewarded, (b) the incentives provided will positively impact student learning and (c) former more centralised systems were less than optimal with

regard to teacher recruitment and accountability, leaving scope for improvement through school-based management reform.

Due to the centralised structure of the (public) education system and the nature of the political economy in developing countries, it is difficult for parents to hold education systems accountable through voting (*long-route* accountability). It is therefore suggested that strengthening *short-route* accountability, between parents and schools, is a more effective means to improve service delivery. As described above, the effectiveness of these accountability relations is likely to depend on the extent to which the incentives of principals and agents are aligned.

Whilst an ‘ideal-type’ of decentralisation may consist of democratic devolution with accountability driven through the electoral cycle, I would argue that an ideal definition of education decentralisation to drive education quality is one in which teachers, school authorities and local communities are able to make decisions about education and allocate resources in order to drive improvements in education quality as defined in section 2.1.4. Accountability, if it obtains, is not through the ballot box but instead depends on the extent of alignment and coherence between how people understand education quality and the actions taken to improve it.

Drawing on empirical work in OECD countries, research on the effects of school-based management on learning achievement has had mixed results with studies suggesting that the specific design of the reform is important for student achievement to be enhanced (Briggs and Wohlstetter, 2003; Fullan and Watson 2000; Leithwood and Jantzi 2006). Interestingly, positive effects of school-based management on students’ performance have been found provided that there are also centralised examinations, which, it has been argued, provide incentives to enhance pupils’ performance and not to promote other interests (Wossmann 2007; Fuchs and Wossmann 2007). Empirical evidence from low income settings is explored in section 2.2.7).

At the same time, the reality is that the outcome of decentralisation reform (including school-based management reform) depends on the motives, the political commitment, and the centrality of the state in resourcing and supporting reform efforts. The ideologies, history and context within which decentralisation is being implemented across Africa can often make this reality grim.

2.2.6. Motivations: ‘good governance’ and neopatrimonialism

Education decentralisation is not pursued in a vacuum. Having looked at its forms and theoretical underpinnings, I now turn to the broader decentralisation context within which these policies are pursued, in particular in a sub-Saharan African context.

While it is hard to rationalise the idea that any political leader would want to relinquish power, motivations for decentralisation include the improvement of public services, enhancing efficiency or ‘good governance’ but are, in practice, ideological (Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall 2008; West et al. 2010). Improving the quality of public service delivery and democratic discourse continue to dominate development studies with significant amounts of international donor finance directed towards goals associated with a ‘good governance’ agenda (see, for example, World Bank 2003; Romeo 2003; Grindle 2004, 2007; UNESCO 2008). Pryor (2005) suggests that community involvement, choice, accountability to users and the promise of empowerment and bottom-up change has helped to make decentralisation a mantra in texts promoting good governance.

The concept of ‘governance’ itself is complex. In a review of institutional and scholarly definitions, Grindle (2007) notes that while there are some commonalities across definitions, they differ significantly in terms of specificity and normativity. In moving from the definition of governance to that of *good* governance, normative views of what ‘ought to be’ become more prominent. Yet definitions still vary in the degree to which they imply particular policies or policy outcomes, including stable macroeconomic policy, poverty reduction and decentralisation. Across all definitions, however, themes of accountability, participation and institutional effectiveness are common (DFID 2001; Kaufmann 2003; Hyden et al. 2004).

Whilst decentralisation programmes may be centrally motivated by a quest to improve governance (Faguet 2014), the level of prescription and breadth of reforms that *must be done* to encourage development and reduce poverty have been heavily criticised (Grindle 2007).¹⁶ Largely shaped by the international development community, the hypothesised link between good governance programmes and their effect on service delivery and poverty reduction is seldom scrutinised.

¹⁶ A lack of guidance provided to developing countries about what is essential and what is not as well as the sequencing of such reforms are two areas that Grindle highlights (2007).

2. Literature: education quality & decentralisation

Decentralisation may remove bottlenecks in decision making and might even make regional and local officials more accountable to local citizens, but it does not necessarily do so; and decentralisation can easily lead to increased inequality among regions and constituencies (Burki et al. 1999; Manor 1999). In a review of the impact of decentralisation on poverty, Jütting et al. (2004) contrast the results in countries that have pursued decentralisation policies by design or by default based on donor influence. Poor performers, including Malawi, are characterised by adopting decentralisation policies by default.

To better understand the ideological underpinnings of decentralisation reform and where it sits within a broader good governance agenda, reference to historical context is instructive. Olowu and Wunsch (2004) map this out in an African context starting with the period after World War II and decolonisation to the onset of democratisation in the 1990s with links to political liberalisation and significant donor financing aimed at promoting growth and reducing poverty through good governance.

Mamdani's macro analysis of the colonial state in Africa helps us to understand the challenges and contradictions of post-colonial governance reform and may partially explain the causes of neopatrimonialism.

In the colonial State, power was consolidated by exaggerating difference (Mamdani 1996). Whether the colonial State exercised direct or indirect rule, the 'subject population [was] incorporated into (not excluded from) the arena of colonial power' (Mamdani 1996:15). Indirect rule, as in Malawi, aimed to 'unpack native tradition' (Mamdani 2014), to focus on the evolution of separate institutions appropriate to different tribal conditions. In this light, the tribal majority were ruled in accordance with customary laws which varied for each tribe while the alien minority was subject to one civil law (Mamdani 2014).

Within this context, the role of the chief became pivotal in the colonial experience. The concern for the British was to appoint the right man to administer the decentralised unit (Mamdani 1996). In this one official, 'every moment of power – legislative, executive, judicial, and administrative – is combined [with] no question of any internal check and balance on the exercise of authority' (Mamdani 1996:54). Here lie the roots of neopatrimonialism, of today's African elite and the confused distinction between public and private spheres.

The concept of neopatrimonial rule was first applied in Africa in the late 1970s, as Médard undertook to account for the Cameroonian state's lack of institutionalisation and underdevelopment. Under President Ahidjo, Médard noted that Cameroon is simultaneously a 'strong, authoritarian, absolute...and impotent state, where political-administrative authority is converted into a private patrimony by a bureaucracy and a party closely controlled by President Ahidjo' (Médard 1979:39). Bach (2011:276-277) notes that neopatrimonialism in Africa is classically defined as the expression of a confusion between office and officeholder with a state endowed, at least formally, with modern institutions and bureaucratic procedures.

The modern State, according to Weber, calls for an independent, professional and institutionalised bureaucracy distinct from the private sphere. Chabal and Daloz contend that the modern State in Africa is not institutionalised but that it presents a façade behind which a political system serves the elite (Chabal and Daloz 1999). I return to the political economy and historical context of decentralisation reform in subsequent chapters on the research context (Chapter 3) and on understanding education decentralisation in Malawi (Chapter 4).

2.2.7. Decentralisation and education quality: empirical studies

This section highlights the growing body of empirical evidence that explores the effects of education decentralisation on education quality in low and, in some cases, middle income contexts. Whilst there is an increasing amount of empirical work in sub-Saharan Africa, decentralisation studies from Latin America continue to predominate (Leithwood and Menzies 1998; Barrera-Osorio et al. 2009). Given the focus of this thesis, attention is directed towards empirical studies that consider school-based management and school grant reforms, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative studies.

Quantitative studies tend to consider the relationship between decentralisation reform and indicators of education quality. Carr-Hill et al. (2015), distinguish between proximal and final education outcomes or outputs as indicators of education quality. Proximal or intermediate outputs dominate the literature and include measures of school dropout, repetition, enrolment. Final outcomes refer to student learning as captured by test scores, psychosocial or non-cognitive skills.

2. Literature: education quality & decentralisation

In a recent systematic review of the effects of school-based decision making on educational outcomes in low and middle-income contexts, Carr-Hill et al. (2015) identified twenty-six impact studies that met a narrow set of eligibility criteria, including a low to medium risk of bias within the identified causal estimates of each study. The studies covered seventeen interventions across thirteen countries of which four were in sub-Saharan Africa. See Appendix 9.1 for a list of these studies together with a brief description of the programme under study.

The results of the meta-analysis suggest that devolving decision-making to the school level contributes to relatively small but significant positive effects on dropout and repetition. Effects on tests scores are larger and more robust. Further analysis across the studies suggests that these estimates are driven by the results from middle-income countries (including Kenya) (Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

Overall, the results suggest that school-based decision-making reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel. Furthermore, school-based management appears to be ineffective when communities choose not to actively participate in decision-making processes.

The authors recommend a need for further robust analysis of the impacts of large-scale school-based decision-making reforms, as well as analysis of the conditions that mediate their impact (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). Although many titles were identified in their initial search, the small number of impact studies included in the meta-analysis represent limited geographic diversity and a small number of discrete interventions.

While school grants represent a financial transfer to schools, as the table in Appendix 9.1 shows, grants tend to be part of a decentralisation reform package. The nature of the relationship between school grants and education quality is therefore not only a question of resource; their effect is likely to encompass multiple direct and indirect effects on education quality. This may include increased school autonomy, training provided to the school and its community, participatory decision-making processes and other initiatives that tend to be encompassed with school grant implementation.

In his review of experimental literature, McEwan (2014) includes four studies that look at the relationship between school grants and learning outcomes with only two from Sub-

Saharan Africa: The Gambia (Blimpo and Evans 2011) and Zambia (Das et al. 2011). The McEwan (2014) review confirms that the body of evidence looking at the relationship between school grants and education quality as measured by test scores is limited.

In a more recent experimental study in Niger, a school grant programme reports a positive effect on parents' contributions in schools both in terms of contributing more money as well as going to meetings and managing school supplies (Beasley and Huillery 2016). Where the community has more power (measured by the level of education of community committee members), they make more contributions. It is also these communities with more authority that are more likely to take charge of monitoring teacher attendance or sanctioning teachers for absenteeism in response to the grant. There are no observed effects on student test scores (Beasley and Huillery 2016).

Although school-based management reforms assume that community members know what should be done to improve educational outcomes, the evidence suggests that this is not always the case (Beasley and Huillery 2016). In their study, Beasley and Huillery (2016) find that school management committees frequently opted to spend their grants on agricultural projects, instead of school materials, teacher incentives or other initiatives likely to affect educational outcomes.

The crowding in of community effort runs contrary to findings in India and Zambia where households were found to be more likely to decrease their private spending on educational inputs (including uniform, books, teaching and learning materials) if the school grants are anticipated and substitute these investments (Das et al. 2011).

Reviewing experiences in a range of sub-Saharan African contexts, De Grauwe (2004) suggests a concern that school-based management can exacerbate inequalities with the most functional schools able to take advantage of it and the less functional schools potentially getting worse. This echoes the finding from an experimental study in The Gambia where the authors suggest a required literacy threshold in the community to enable the school to benefit from the school grant and training intervention (Blimpo and Evans 2011).

Overall, Mbiti (2016) notes that the effectiveness of increased inputs (such as school grants), even as part of broader decentralisation reform, may be hampered by behavioural responses by parents or head teachers, and the lack of accountability.

2. Literature: education quality & decentralisation

In a study of decisional location and process, Chikoko (2008) considers the state of education decentralisation in Malawi and Zimbabwe. Based on a one district decentralisation pilot in Malawi, the author alludes to the challenges of an entrenched work culture in a context of low salaries, reluctance to take on delegated work, and confused lines of accountability between staff. He concludes by suggesting that change brought about through the pilot was structural change on paper rather than a change in behaviour and work ethic. This builds on the findings of a qualitative study of the same district by Davies et al. (2003).

Suzuki (2002) explores parental participation and accountability in the context of decentralised service provision in Uganda. In a qualitative study in eight primary schools, she finds that the use of 'exit' (i.e. the transferring of children to another school) is rarely effective and 'voice' is therefore the only potential sanction measure. This too is limited leading to a weak accountability framework which renders the head teacher *responsible* rather than *accountable* to the community. Her findings echo a study of local government in Uganda and Kenya that suggests that the 'assumption that decentralisation of decision-making will automatically result in decisions that reflect the needs and priorities of local citizens is naïve' (Devas and Grant 2003:314).

2.3. KNOWLEDGE GAPS: THE FOCUS OF THE THESIS

The objective of this thesis is to build on both the theoretical and empirical work exploring the contested concepts of education quality and decentralisation and their relationship. As noted in the introduction, this study will make a contribution to the literature on both education quality and decentralisation, and try to break down the line between them.

In reviewing the literature in this chapter, a number of knowledge gaps emerge. These are now reviewed together with how this thesis will respond and make an important contribution to knowledge by addressing the overall research question and sub-questions presented in Chapter 1 (section 1.3).

There is no single definition of education quality. Whilst some researchers suggest approaches to understand education quality, others argue that any attempt to define it is futile. There is no consideration given within the existing empirical literature of how different perspectives on education quality may or may not impact on the effectiveness of interventions designed to improve education quality. Exploring these ideas within the context of decentralisation reform in Malawi is a valuable contribution to knowledge and a core focus of this thesis.

While the concept of education quality remains contested and multifaceted, two broad categorising techniques can help define approaches to its conceptualisation. Qualitative approaches focus on process, participation and the scope for multiple definitions. Quantitative approaches, on the other hand, could be defined through attempts to understand the (unobserved) latent concept, but in practice and with some justification, focus increasingly on learning achievement as the main criterion to assess education quality.

There are very few studies that seek to understand education quality from different perspectives. While the example of a ‘quality continuum’ was identified in a study of early years’ education in the UK, there is no research to date that has set out both to understand what is meant by education quality from different perspectives and then to combine these perspectives into one study in the sub-Saharan African context.¹⁷ This

¹⁷ The UK example here is useful in its methodological contribution rather than in its conceptualisation of education quality itself in the UK context.

thesis sets out to understand how primary education quality is understood in Malawi from different perspectives (Chapter 6).

While there is an evident need to make progress in basic levels of literacy and mathematics, particularly in low income countries, it is not yet known whether understanding education quality from different perspectives plays an important role in this process. The idea that the contested nature of education quality could in itself impact on the effectiveness of decentralisation reform has not been considered within the empirical literature.

While there is a significant body of empirical research looking at education decentralisation and variations of school-based management reform, it remains limited in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly with national scale reform. A recent systematic review of school-based decision making and its effect on educational outcomes in low and middle-income contexts calls for further analysis of school-based management reform (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). In this thesis, I examine the effect of the Primary School Improvement Programme (a type of school based management reform) on quantitative indicators of education quality (Chapter 5).

The ‘accountability triangle’ presented in the 2004 World Development Report draws a distinction between long and short route accountability and with it sheds light on two central mechanisms to drive the effectiveness of decentralisation reform: participation and accountability. The principal-agent framework presents a theoretical model to understand the relationships between different agents within an education system and suggests some of the associated challenges.

This thesis makes a contribution to the limited exploration and understanding of the channels through which decentralisation may or may not affect education quality and, crucially, the extent to which the contested nature of education quality may affect the outcomes of decentralisation reform itself. Pritchett (2015) suggests the need to analyse issues of coherence and alignment within education systems. This study aims to make a contribution to this endeavour through an in-depth exploration at the school level of the interrelationship between decentralisation and different perspectives of education quality (Chapter 6).

Whilst there have been several studies on decentralisation in Malawi (Davies et al. 2003; Chikoko 2008; Chiweza 2010; Nampota and Beckmann 2011), that explore the nature of community participation in primary schools (Rose 2003b; Barnett 2013) as well as those that consider the role of international donors within the education sector (Savage 2012), there is little understanding and evidence about the nature of education decentralisation, in particular focused on the more recent changes to school financing as part of the Primary School Improvement Programme.

A review of the recent systematic reviews in education exploring ‘what works’ to improve learning outcomes, shed light on the importance of context and the need to understand the circumstances in which a particular reform may or may not have an effect on outcomes of interest. Given the variation in results and selection of studies highlighted in the Evans and Popova study (2016), this thesis aims to take a closer look at one piece of reform in one context with significant attention given to understanding context as well as the distinction between intended and actual reform.

Supported by international donors as an essential ingredient of ‘good governance’, decentralisation can have multiple meanings and objectives, including the improvement of education outcomes. The context within which decentralisation reform is implemented and the rationale that lies behind its inception are important determinants of the likely effectiveness of the reform in practice. Much of the literature to date arguably focuses on the wrong question (whether or not decentralisation works) without either specifying what is meant by decentralisation in practice or adequately understanding and analysing the context within which the reform has been implemented. The thesis will therefore seek to provide a clear contextual frame for the decentralisation reform under study, including how the Primary School Improvement Programme fits within the broader decentralisation effort in Malawi (Chapter 4).

The approach outlined here calls for mixed methods to understand both the context and circumstances within which policies are introduced as well as the effect they have. An overview of the methodological approach is considered in the next chapter. Here it is signalled as contributing to the continued limited application of mixed method approaches to evaluation and the expected benefits of combining contrasting approaches to analyse two complex concepts and the relationship between them.

3.1. MALAWI: AN OVERVIEW

Malawi is a small, land-locked country bordering Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia in Southern Africa (see Figure 3). Malawi ranks 170 out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index (UNDP 2016).

Malawi has a relatively high population density compared to the region, and the estimated seventeen million people overwhelmingly live in rural areas, although the rate of urbanisation in the political capital, Lilongwe, and the commercial capital, Blantyre, is rising.

Education statistics in Malawi are stark. The school-age population represents 37 per cent of the total and is the highest in the region (World Bank 2010). At around \$400 per year, GNI per capita is one of the lowest in the region. Combined with the age distribution, Malawi faces the task of educating the highest proportion of young people with one of the lowest resource bases. The average number of years a child spends in school is 4.4 years as opposed to the expected 10 years (UNDP 2016). This compares poorly with neighbouring Zambia where the average number of years of schooling is 6.9 years.

The economy is based upon subsistence agriculture and cash crops (of maize and tobacco, primarily), and fisheries on the shores of Lake Malawi. Seventy per cent of the population live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 a day (UNDP 2016).

Three ethnic groups are dominant: the Chewa, from the Central and Southern Regions, the Yao, around the lake, and the Tumbuka in the North. The national language is Chichewa, reflecting the historical dominance of the Chewa amongst the political elite as well as their larger share of the population. Religious faith is important in Malawi. The majority (83 per cent) of the population are Christian. The Yao, who dominate the communities around Lake Malawi, are Muslim (Government of Malawi 2008a).

3.2. MALAWI: ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL HISTORY

Malawi's current socio-economic challenges reflect its resource-poor, landlocked and vulnerable structural features. It is important to consider, however, the political and economic processes which have shaped the response to these features following independence from British colonial rule in 1964. These factors start to suggest the nature of the political settlement and social contract in Malawi and will be an important reference for the analysis of decentralisation and policy implementation in the subsequent chapters.

Cammack (2011b) suggests that Malawi's post-independence economic history can be divided into five phases:

Phase 1 State-led economic growth under President Banda's authoritarian (1964-1979) rule and long-term vision for national development

Phase 2 Stalled development as Malawi was hit by external shocks (the oil (1979-1994) crisis and war in Mozambique) and a weakening of Banda's position

Phase 3 Transition to multi-party democracy with uneven economic (1994-2004) liberalisation, growing corruption and a series of macro-economic crises under President Muluzi

Phase 4 Tightened regulations and bureaucratic discipline under President (2004-2009) Bingu wa Mutharika. Economy back on track and growing fast.

Phase 5 Slowed growth and crippling shortages of fuel, electricity and (2009 – to date) foreign exchange. President Bingu Mutharika died in 2012 amidst a political crisis and was succeeded by his Vice-President, Joyce Banda. Brother to late President Mutharika wins elections in 2014.

Malawi's post-independence President, Hastings Banda, led a ruthless state-party machine, using his highly-centralised executive to implement his development policy. Power concentration allowed Banda to be directly involved or to oversee policymaking in every sector (Cammack 2011b). Harrigan describes his strategy as "state monopoly capitalism", with a fusion of the state and business in his own person (Harrigan 2001:37).

Banda's regime centralised the production and use of economic rents, ensured compliance, and rewarded loyalists (state bureaucrats, MPs, party loyalists) by investing

3. Research context and methodological approach

them in the national agenda (Cammack 2011b). At the same time, the civil service under Banda was relatively honest, hardworking and professional (Anders 2005).

By the late 1970s, the formidable centralisation that Banda had exercised over rent management was beginning to weaken. A growing culture of human rights abuse kept many in line but demoralised and frightened the public service (Cammack 2011b). When donors suspended aid in 1992 and with increasing domestic political unrest, Banda called a referendum on the question of multi-party democracy. Over sixty per cent voted in favour and the country held its first democratic election since the 1960s (Harrigan 2001).

Political liberalisation brought Bakili Muluzi and his United Democratic Front (UDF) to power in 1994. He was an able communicator who pledged *mphamvu kwa anthu* “power to the people” and for the first few years of his tenure, and with strong international support, Malawi’s economic performance improved (Harrigan 2001).

The democratic transition, however, set new parameters for managing political competition. Where Banda had control of parliament, Muluzi had to contend with opposition parties and a minority government. To retain support, the President needed resources to distribute: government funds were siphoned for political and personal ends and corruption spiralled out of control (Khembo 2004). Social and economic indicators plummeted in what has come to be called the ‘lost decade’ (Cammack 2011a).

Having failed in his bid to change the constitution to stand for a third term, Muluzi’s nominated successor, Bingu wâ Mutharika, won the 2004 Presidential election as the UDF candidate. Not content to be a figure-head, Mutharika broke with the UDF and formed a new party, the Democratic People’s Party, and stood on a platform of anti-corruption with a new, more growth-oriented development vision (Cammack 2017). Aid donors, who had withdrawn support from Malawi during the course of Banda and Muluzi’s reigns, flocked back to support this new government (Cammack 2011a).

Mutharika won a landslide victory for his second term in 2009 but the progress Malawi enjoyed since 2004 soon faltered. Mutharika’s minority government and weak political base in his first term kept him focused on growth as a means of gaining support and then winning votes in 2009. As his party-base grew and the opposition fragmented, the need to win votes through development was less urgent; other means of gaining support in a clientelist context could be used once the ruling-party apparatus was established.

3. Research context and methodological approach

With shortages of foreign exchange, fuel and electricity and a growing intolerance of dissenting voices, political unrest spilled onto the streets in 2011. Malawi's international partners published a statement saying they shared the concerns of Malawians about deteriorating governance trends and several aid donors began to withhold funds (Cammack 2017). Mutharika became increasingly autocratic in his response and began to prepare the ground for his brother, Peter, to lead his party into the next elections scheduled for 2014 (Cammack 2011a).

Following President Bingu Mutharika's sudden death in 2012, his Vice-President, Joyce Banda, took on the Presidency and championed economic reform and anti-corruption (Cammack 2017). The Ministers of Finance and Justice were sacked in 2013, following revelations of widespread corruption across government. Referred to as the "Cashgate" affair, international donors which had stepped in strongly to support Banda's new government in 2012, pulled out of direct support to government, including in primary education and other social programmes (Ravishankar et al. 2016), as corruption allegations were investigated.

Despite the progressive strengthening of Malawi's middle class¹⁸ since independence, the nature of its political parties and system remains more or less unchanged. The main parties are centred on personalities rather than issues. As Cammack argues, rather than strengthen accountability and participation, multiparty elections have incentivised politicians' misuse of state resources to gain and retain power (Cammack 2011b). Democracy in Malawi has been slow to foster the institutions needed to rein in such abuses.

The cult of the leader and the tendency to centralise power in order to maintain it may explain why, despite the long history of decentralisation and more recent policy and legislative reform, democratic decentralisation in Malawi remains limited. The nature of education decentralisation in Malawi will be explored in depth in Chapter 4 but it cannot be fully understood without an understanding of this political and economic context.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that when compared regionally, Malawi's middle class remains relatively small. This further contributes to power and money remaining in the hands of the few to a much larger extent than neighbouring countries. Furthermore, a smaller middle class limits the opportunity for change and progress across a range of sectors. In education, those that can afford are more likely to opt out of the state system thereby reducing the pressure for change.

3.3. MALAWI: EDUCATION

From the late 1970s, overall government policy was significantly influenced by Malawi's adoption of a structural adjustment programme (for a description of the programmes, see Harrigan 2001 and Gulhati 1989). The education sector was no exception. Inadequate human capital had been identified by Washington Institutions as one of the factors contributing to the economic crisis at the end of the 1970s (Gulhati 1989). World Bank loans maintained and even increased investment in education but at the same time, its influence led to an increase in primary school fees and declining enrolments in the regions where enrolment was already the lowest (Southern and Central Regions) (Rose 2003a).

Following the multi-party elections in 1994, the new government fulfilled its manifesto promise to abolish primary school fees leading to a 51 per cent increase in enrolment; a policy known as Free Primary Education (FPE) (World Bank 2009). There was a similar proportionate increase in the number of teachers, the majority of whom were untrained.

The government thus faced the dual challenge of needing to provide additional resources for the increase in enrolment, as well as to compensate for the loss in fee income. It met this challenge by increasing the resources available to education, particularly at the primary level. Total government recurrent expenditure to education as a proportion of total government expenditure, increased from less than 10 per cent in the 1980s to 21 per cent by 1994 and 28 per cent in 1996, over 60 per cent of which was allocated to primary schooling (Rose 2003a). This was largely achieved as a result of the support of international donors, which were providing up to 40 per cent of the resources for education at the time.

More recently, international donor support to Malawi's education sector has been channelled both through the national budget and 'off-budget' projects.¹⁹ The donor share (both on and off budget) of total public expenditure has risen from approximately 27 per cent in 2008/9 to around 45 per cent in 2013/14 (Ravishankar et al. 2016).

Table 1 shows that the Government's budgetary allocation to recurrent education expenditure is now back to around 12 to 14 per cent. The steep decline in donor funding

¹⁹ 'Off-budget' projects refer to programmes supported by external donors in which the finances do not flow through any Government of Malawi accounts. For this reason, the Government of Malawi does not include these figures within the national budget figures.

3. Research context and methodological approach

in 2014/15 along with the steep increase in unit cost is associated with the “Cashgate affair” that led to the withdrawal of a significant amount of donor funding alongside a devaluation in the local currency (Ravishankar et al. 2016). In UK sterling terms, the unit cost remained more or less constant between 2011/12 and 2014/15 with £1 equal to approximately MK300 in 2011/12 and equal to approximately MK650 in 2014/15.

Table 1 Enrolment and government expenditure in education

	Total		Primary		
	Recurrent education expenditure as % of total government	Proportion of the education budget funded by international donors	Enrolment	Recurrent Expenditure (MK)	Unit costs (MK)
2006/07	12.0%	36.0%	3,280,714	7,618,571,881	2,322
2011/12	14.4%	31.0%	4,034,330	22,524,539,109	5,583
2014/15	14.4%	12.2%	4,603,941	54,512,443,378	11,840

Source: budget figures provided by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology.

Although more children started going to primary school from 1994, quality (in a multifaceted sense), which was already low, deteriorated even further and remains a persistent challenge (Chimombo 2005). Malawi ranks bottom in the region for grade 6 English reading and second from bottom in maths, according to the Southern and East African Consortium Measuring Education Quality (SACMEQ III). Only 9 per cent of pupils achieved a minimum level of mastery in reading. In maths, 98 per cent of pupils did not possess skills beyond basic numeracy (World Bank 2010). Malawi’s primary school completion rate of 32 per cent compares with an average in sub-Saharan Africa of 61 per cent. For historical reasons, educational attainment tends to vary by region, with higher levels evident in the North, where missionaries initially established formal schooling in the late 19th century (McCracken 2008).

3.3.1. System

The formal education system in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 structure: eight years of primary education starting age 6 (Standard 1 to Standard 8), four years of secondary (Form 1 to Form 4) and four years of university-level education. At the end of their primary education, students take the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination which determines their eligibility for entry into secondary school. At the end of four years of secondary education, students take the Malawi School Certificate Examination.²⁰

The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (hereafter, Ministry) retains overall responsibility for primary, secondary and higher education as well as a complementary basic education programme for out-of-school youth.

Following the 1998 Decentralisation Act, much of the responsibility for the *implementation* of primary education was devolved (theoretically) to local councils (to be discussed in Chapter 4). The Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development is therefore responsible for the provision of primary education services through District Education Offices managed by District Education Managers (DEMs). Financing for primary education comes from the Ministry of Education budget but is managed through the Ministry of Local Government. The DEMs report jointly to the Ministry of Local Government and the Ministry of Education.

There are thirty-four education districts and each of these is further compartmentalised into zones. A Primary Education Adviser (PEA) is responsible for monitoring, oversight and support for the primary schools in her or his zone (around fifteen to twenty schools).

3.3.2. Policy and planning

Malawi's national development strategy, the Malawi Growth and Development Strategy II (2011 to 2016) sets out Malawi's objective to continue reducing poverty through sustainable economic growth and infrastructure development (Government of Malawi

²⁰ At the time of the research, students would sit for the Junior Certificate of Education after two years of secondary education. This was phased out starting in 2015, partly to save costs but also because it was perceived to have no validity in the job market.

2011a). Education is a priority area within the strategy, which highlights its instrumental role for advancing social and economic progress.

Education is essential for social-economic development and industrial growth. It is an instrument for empowering the poor, the weak and the voiceless as it provides them with equal opportunity to participate in local and national development. (Government of Malawi 2011a:41)

A ten-year mission for education is set out in the National Education Sector Plan (NESP) (2008 to 2017) ‘to provide quality and relevant education to the Malawian nation’ (Government of Malawi 2008a:iii). The NESP responds to the first Malawi Growth and Development Strategy (2006-2011) and the longer-term national strategy, Vision 2020. It also responds to Malawi’s international commitments at the time enshrined in the Education For All and Millennium Development Goal Frameworks and now in the Sustainable Development Goal framework.²¹

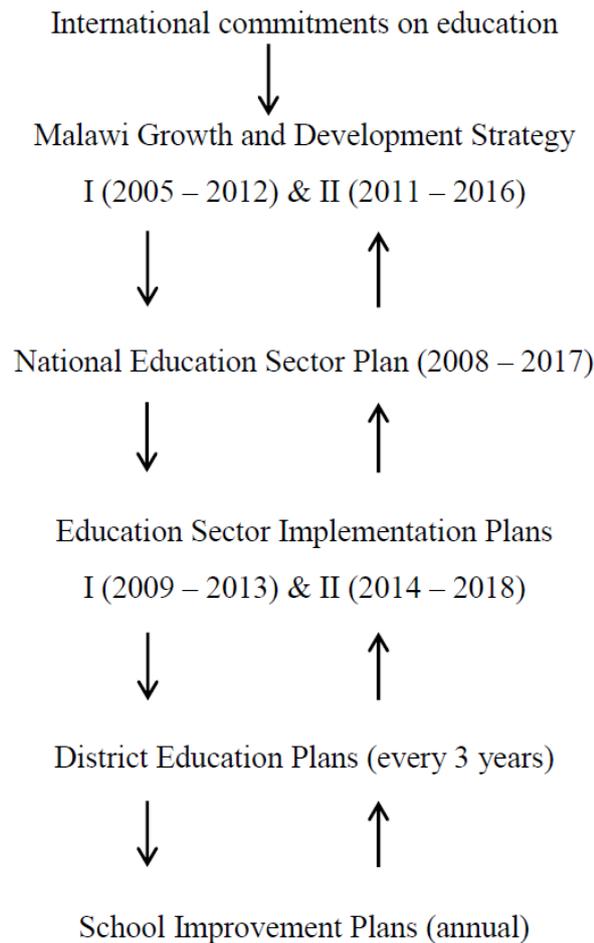
Figure 4 sets out a schema for how Malawi’s national development strategy is designed to inform and guide education sector planning at all levels. The schema suggests that planning from the school level up is also designed to inform national education sector plans. The extent to which the plans inform one another from the bottom up is less clear than from the top down. For example, District Education Plans and school improvement plans are expected to address national policy priorities but there is no formal mechanism for the school plan to inform the district plan and so on. The extent to which there is coherence across these plans and, in particular, a shared understanding of what quality education constitutes, is explored in the subsequent empirical chapters.

The NESP sets three over-arching priorities for improvement across all education sub-sectors: (1) quality and relevance; (2) access and equity; and (3) governance and management. Under each sub-sector, strategies are presented to address identified challenges. For primary education, these strategies include mobilising communities to participate in ‘whole-school development’ and ensuring appropriate decentralisation of delivery of education services. This incorporates the main thrust of a related strategy on

²¹ Six Education For All (EFA) goals were agreed by the international community (including Malawi) in Dakar in 2000. These included improving access to quality education for all children by 2015, regardless of circumstance, as well as improving all aspects of a quality education so that recognised and measurable learning outcomes are achieved by all.

community participation, the National Strategy for Community Participation in Primary School Management (Government of Malawi 2004).

Figure 4 From education policy to implementation in Malawi



The community participation strategy aimed to shift the focus of community engagement from the provision of resources to involvement in school management and ‘whole-school development’. It also aimed to respond to the confusion in the implementation of Free Primary Education which led to the perception by communities that they no longer had any responsibilities for their local schools (Government of Malawi 2004). The strategy presents community participation as an important element to improve education quality and to enhance decentralisation.

3. Research context and methodological approach

The first Education Sector Implementation Plan (2009-2013) served as a guide for the articulation of the broad objectives of the NESP, and further prioritised policy objectives around four policy targets (see Table 2). Under governance and management for primary education, the ESIP states that ‘school and community participation has long been considered a necessary pre-requisite for improving the quality of primary education, especially with the introduction of decentralisation’ (Government of Malawi 2009a:49). It is within this policy context and its focus on the role of community participation and decentralisation to enhance education quality that this thesis is set.

Table 2 Education Sector Implementation Plan policy priorities (2009-2013)

NESP and ESIP goals	Equity and Access	Quality and Relevance		Governance and Management
Policy Targets	Enhance the construction and rehabilitation of school infrastructure	Reduce national pupil-qualified teacher ratio	Enhance the inspection of education institutions	Improve the participation of local communities and the private sector in the provision of education

Source: Government of Malawi (2009a)

3.3.3. International donor support and influence

Primary education is singled out in the current National Education Sector Plan for ‘fast-track’ reform, an reference to the Fast Track Initiative (FTI) to which Malawi successfully applied for funding in 2010. The initiative, now renamed the Global Partnership for Education, was launched in 2002 initially to help low-income countries achieve the Education For All (EFA) goals and the MDGs, and now focused on the new Sustainable Development Goals. The FTI was designed to provide a financing mechanism for partner countries that demonstrate leadership for implementation and results through the development of a credible education sector plan. It responded to the commitment made in Dakar in 2000 that no country seriously committed to education for all would be thwarted in the achievement by a lack of resources (UNESCO 2000).

At the country level, partnership between donors and the Ministry is managed through the local education group where a group of multi- and bi-lateral donors have accounted for the vast majority of aid commitments to education since 2000. The UK’s Department

3. Research context and methodological approach

for International Development (DFID), the European Commission, the International Development Association through the World Bank, the United States (USAID) and Germany have been the largest financial contributors.

DFID and the World Bank have predominantly funded basic education activities, including primary school construction, textbooks, and school grants. USAID has run a number of programmes, within which the focus has been mainly on improving the quality of primary education with a particular focus on early grade reading in recent years.²²

Malawi was invited to join the FTI in 2004, but no major steps were taken until two years later. In fact, one of the primary motivations behind the development of the NESP was to apply for FTI endorsement and financial support. In order to do so, the local donor education group first had to endorse the education sector plan. This process represented a clear opportunity for donor influence and in early 2009, although Malawi had ‘taken significant steps towards the achievement of the MDGs’ the donors were unwilling to endorse the NESP (MLEDG 2009:1). Instead, ‘both the Government and Development Partners recognise that the resulting approach to planning has been inefficient, and that the needed reforms will require a comprehensive plan’ (MLEDG 2009:3). Working together to produce the Education Sector Implementation Plan, an activity-based budget, a capacity development plan and a results framework, the local donors endorsed the ESIP in November 2009.

Donors were involved at every stage of education sector planning as set out in Figure 4. From funding consultants to advise the Ministry on the development of the national strategy (NESP), to ensuring their priorities were included in the final documentation (Savage 2015). Donors, for example, provided strongly worded advice on how to prioritise goals and strategies in order to achieve optimum results, and ensure efficiency, effectiveness and equity (Savage 2015:110). In line with the literature suggesting that school-based decision-making is widely promoted by donors as a means for improving educational quality (Carr-Hill et al. 2015), one of the areas where donors had been

²² The focus areas for international donor activities changes over time. What is referenced here relates to the realities during the period 2008 to 2014. From 2009, USAID funded a three-year programme to support education decentralisation. Japan, through its international development agency JICA (Japan International Corporation Agency), focused on supporting decentralisation, working with District Education Managers to produce District Education Plans.

particularly influential in Malawi was on the provision of direct financing to primary schools.

The award of US\$90 million FTI funding in 2010 reflected positive judgement of and faith in the education reform agenda and added to the growing optimism in the sector following the launch of the Sector Wide Approach and Joint Financing Agreement in the same year. The Sector Wide Approach aimed to ensure that education policy planning, implementation and monitoring would follow one comprehensive strategy - the National Education Sector Plan - and all stakeholders in education would work together in achieving the goals therein. The Joint Financing Agreement was a commitment by four donors²³ to pool part of their funding and channel it through government systems to be spent on a list of eligible expenditures aligned with the NESP. Together with FTI funding, these commitments were expected to bring in an additional US\$256 million to support the ambitious reform agenda that Malawi had set for itself.

3.3.4. Primary School Improvement Programme

Strengthening decentralisation, improving teaching and learning and enhancing community participation were presented as priority areas in the NESP and ESIP. Giving direct school grants was included as a central strategy to enhance community participation and improve education quality. School grants, alongside teacher training, the provision of teaching and learning materials and school construction, were the core activities that Malawi intended to fund through their grant from the Fast Track Initiative.²⁴

“Decentralisation for Quality Education” was the theme of the tenth Joint Sector Review of the education sector in 2011 (Government of Malawi 2011b). In his opening remarks, the Minister for Education emphasised the importance of involving people at all levels of the education system through the decentralisation process and noted the progress that had already been made in the decentralisation of direct school financing and the

²³ The four comprised multi- and bi-lateral donors: the International Development Association of the World Bank (US\$50m); the UK’s Department for International Development (US\$90m); the German Development Cooperation (US\$25m); and, UNICEF (US\$1m).

²⁴ Other activities were also mentioned under the heading “FTI support would help us...”. These were: train 16,000 teachers through Open and Distance Learning over 3 years; expand Teacher Training College capacity; build 5,500 classrooms with water, sanitation and teachers’ houses and girls’ hostels; provide textbooks and pedagogical materials; reach 600,000 out-of-school children through complementary basic education and other approaches and build capacity in key areas for program implementation

3. Research context and methodological approach

implementation of school improvement plans (Government of Malawi 2011b:3). Decentralisation was a way to ensure ‘good results in the implementation of education programmes’, he claimed. Representing the international community at the same event, the chair of the education donor group stressed the need to turn the plans into action given the significant uplift in international financial support (Government of Malawi 2011b:2).

The policy objectives related to decentralisation in primary schools and set out in the NESP and ESIP are encapsulated in the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) which the Ministry planned to phase in over a four-year period between 2010 and 2014.

The overall goal of the PSIP was to ‘to enhance and improve education decentralisation’ with a specific objective to improve education quality. The PSIP technical plan (Government of Malawi 2010a) sets out nine objectives:

1. Improve the quality of teaching and learning in schools;
2. Increase participation in primary school management and governance by local communities;
3. Improve efficiency through effective and needs-based allocation of resources at school-level used in line with the principles of accountability and transparency;
4. Improve monitoring and support of primary schools;
5. Empower teachers, parents and school management committees with skills in school improvement planning, financial management, reporting and other management issues through training, implementation and support;
6. Make available resources to public primary schools for implementing activities from approved School Improvement Plans;
7. Make available resources to Primary Education Advisers to use in their zones for improved monitoring and support in line with a Zone Improvement Plan, this will include support for Continuous Professional Development at school, cluster and zone levels;
8. Make available resources to District Education Offices to facilitate capacity building for schools, communities and zones in improvement planning, financial

management and accountability as well as for improved monitoring and support and management of the programme;

9. Target schools disadvantaged by gender and poverty.

To achieve these multiple objectives, the Ministry would provide grants to schools, zones and districts together with a training package on school improvement planning, community participation and financial management.

In order to complete a school improvement plan, schools had to identify what their needs are, to prioritise these, and to make the best use of available resources to achieve their improvement targets. This is a two-way process: schools are encouraged to adapt the appropriate bigger picture vision – set out in the national strategy documents and in line with eligible expenditures – to their own targets, and the school improvement plans are intended to feed up into the District Education Plans and influence national education policy. Yet this is more than spending money, or achieving quick fixes; the school improvement plan is intended to part of a process of building ownership at school level.

The focus for improvement has to be identified, the changes planned and implemented, and then embedded in the school's philosophy and practice. The planned changes will involve agreed alterations to a school's procedures, practices and outcomes, and as a necessary consequence changes in the attitudes of everyone engaged with the school. Changing the attitudes and perceptions held by stakeholders of what is possible and acceptable is the most challenging task of all. (Quaigrain et al. 2010:13).

The materials used to train schools and communities on school improvement plan development state clearly that the objective of a school improvement plan 'is the improvement of learner achievement' (Government of Malawi, 2010b:12). The training guide explains that this can be achieved through a range of activities, including improving the delivery of the curriculum, creating a positive environment for teaching and learning and enabling the head teacher to demonstrate effective leadership (Government of

Malawi, 2010b).²⁵ Furthermore, the guidelines on the use of the grant stipulate categories of expenditure that schools should follow.²⁶

The PSIP involved re-establishing school bank accounts for the first time since primary school fees were abolished in 1994 and enabling schools and communities to undertake improvement activities with annual grants in the range of MK300,000 to MK900,000 depending on school enrolment.²⁷ Zones would receive grants to implement zonal improvement plans while districts would receive additional funds for monitoring and support to schools and zones in the district.

The PSIP was designed to build on a number of donor funded national programmes and subnational pilots. The first of these was a World Bank programme, Direct Support to Schools (DSS), that started in 2006. The focus for the DSS programme was on district-managed procurement of basic Teaching and Learning Materials and enabled schools nationwide to procure items from a pre-determined list of materials, sourced from specified suppliers. Schools did not directly manage the money but instead a cheque was issued by the District Education Manager, either directly to the supplier or to the school to pay the supplier. In the first phase of DSS, the grants themselves were the equivalent of \$200.

From 2008 with additional support from DFID, the DSS allocations increased to allow schools to procure items for minor maintenance of school infrastructure in addition to a small discretionary allowance. Following the perceived success of the DSS programme and a desire by the donors to channel resources where they were most needed, DFID and USAID financed sub-national pilots of what was to become the PSIP with increased levels of funding and discretion given to schools in addition to the opening of school bank accounts.

²⁵ Three guiding principles of the School Improvement Plan are set out in the training manual: (i) learning focus – every child can learn; (ii) responsibility – community members, school leaders, and learners are responsible for development, implementation and monitoring of the SIP; and (iii) continuous improvement – the SIP process happens every year with each cycle building on strengths and striving for continuous school improvement (Government of Malawi 2010b:15).

²⁶ Budget guidelines for the school grants: teaching and learning materials (20%); improved teaching and learning (50%); repairs and routine maintenance (20%); school management and administration (10%).

²⁷ The Malawi Kwacha devalued significantly in 2012/3. The current exchange rate is approximately £1 = MK650. When PSIP was being planned, the exchange rate was approximately £1 = MK280. School grants of between MK300,000 to MK900,000 would have been the equivalent of £1,000 to £3,200 rather than £450 to £1,300 in today's prices.

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The USAID programme, the Education Decentralisation Support Activity, supported the introduction of school grants in six districts, one in each region of the country. Ministry and USAID officials selected the six districts based on poor education indicators, poverty levels and HIV prevalence (Government of Malawi 2010a). In 2009/10, USAID provided technical assistance to develop, implement and monitor school improvement plans together with school improvement grants in 221 schools across the six districts. The Ministry and partners agreed that these same six districts would be those selected to be the first phase of the PSIP in the 2010-11 school year.

Further details on the phased roll out of the PSIP are presented in Chapter 5. Here I draw attention to the fact that the PSIP was seen as a core component of Malawi's education sector plan as well as fitting within the broader context of Malawi's decentralisation reform. With strong international donor as well as Ministry support, it was a central pillar in Malawi's education reform agenda.

Recent evidence suggests that the PSIP remains a central pillar of Malawi's strategy in primary education, at least from an international donor perspective. A 2016 World Bank report on primary education in Malawi notes that 'the strategy for improving learning achievement in lower primary classes relies heavily on the strengthening of the PSIP, including provision of school improvement grants' (Ravishankar et al. 2016:5).

3.4. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This section presents an overview and justification for the methodological approach used to carry out the empirical investigation of the research questions (see Chapter 1, section 1.3). While it presents an overview of the qualitative and quantitative methods used and takes note of concern for reliability, validity and generalisability, more detailed discussions of the *specific* methods used to address each research sub-question are included in the three empirical chapters that follow.

I first outline the rationale for a mixed methods approach before considering the qualitative and quantitative methods used. The final section describes the fieldwork, limitations and ethical considerations.

3.4.1. Why mixed methods?

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the sources of research funding, the international policy discourse is reflected in many researchers' narrow focus on quantitative indicators of education quality. With 'learning outcomes' now central to the new Sustainable Development Goal on education, significant policy and research debate is focused on ways to develop and implement different metrics of learning and less to explore the contested and multi-faceted nature of education quality itself. As Tikly (2015:237-8) argues, while governments and donors invest in research programmes aimed at finding out 'what works' in raising learning outcomes, the philosophical and methodological assumptions underlying much of the current discourse including what learning is and how we come to know what learning is are rarely made explicit.

Empiricism, argues Tikly (2015), has become the most dominant approach to researching education quality and finding out 'what works' to improve learning outcomes. The strength of the evidence for empiricism relates to the robustness of the methodology used. Systematic reviews used for the design of interventions or research programmes informed by empiricism often invoke a hierarchy of methods (Pawson et al. 2005) in which randomised controlled trials along with studies based on econometric analysis and school effectiveness studies are the 'gold standard'.

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Interpretivism on the other hand, adopts a more relativist stance emphasising the role of subjective meaning and the constitutive role of language, discourse and ideologies with qualitative methodologies aimed at understanding classroom processes, the perspectives of different stakeholders and the genealogy of dominant discourses and ideologies.

Within the literature on programme evaluation, there have been calls to shift the emphasis, or rather the scope, of evaluation. It has been argued that little has been learnt from the evaluation of programmes in the past few decades because the focus has been solely on whether an intervention worked and not extended to exploring why it worked (Pawson and Tilley 1997). One view is that more needs to be understood about the fundamental mechanisms that determine why a policy works and the conditions in which it can be expected to work (Deaton 2010). This viewpoint has been articulated across a range of disciplines (Heckman 1992; Craig et al. 2008; White 2009), and essentially refers to the problem of external validity. For an evaluation to guide future policymaking, its findings should be replicable to other populations and settings. Yet given the importance of context, this may rarely be feasible.

Cartwright (2007) argues no single method of evaluation or study design dominates; there is no gold standard despite the claims of certain groups to the contrary (Banerjee and Duflo 2008). Cartwright (2007) emphasises the importance of in-depth contextual analysis, examining each link of the possible causal chain, and understanding what it is one is measuring and how this relates to a theoretical framework. To be successful, this may well demand a range of data collection methods set within a sophisticated study design.

There is a growing emphasis within the programme evaluation literature on the importance of a theoretical understanding of how a programme is expected to change outcomes (Cartwright 2007; White and Masset 2007; Deaton 2010). In some cases, the theory may already be anchored to a strong body of evidence. In others, a focus on collecting data about process and mechanisms may be required to map out a potential causal link. This type of approach has been the basis of a number of studies in developing countries (see, for example, White and Masset 2007).

According to Tikly (2015), many researchers within International Comparative Education whether closer to an empiricist or interpretivist approach embrace the need for a pragmatic use of mixed methods and interdisciplinarity to solve complex problems.

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For example, much school effectiveness research has focused on the importance or otherwise of class size as a ‘determinant’ of educational outcomes in low-income countries (Simmons and Alexander 1978; Hanushek 1995; Glewwe and Kremer 2006). However, empirical studies conducted over many years have been inconclusive about the relationship between class size and learner outcomes in low-income countries (Glewwe 2002). Evidence from qualitative studies (see, for example, Westbrook 2013) clearly shows that the effects of class size are mediated by a range of factors including teacher quality and the forms of pedagogy used and that these can vary significantly across contexts. This serves to highlight the importance of mixed methods in researching education outcomes.

There is no ‘correct method’ in education but as Lewin (1990:47) suggests, the researcher must make choices based on the research questions and select methods most likely to provide insight and explanation into matters of concern. The nature of the research questions presented in Chapter 1 suggest the need for a combination of methods to probe meanings, contextual understandings and mechanisms on the one hand and determine measures and quantitative effects on the other.

Bryman (2012) suggests that quantitative and qualitative strategies are compatible and mixed methods both feasible and desirable. For this thesis, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods appears not only desirable but also necessary to tackle the issues of concern. The aim of understanding the *effect* of decentralisation reform on education quality and the *mechanisms* that may or may not link these two contested concepts suggests the need for a mixed method approach.

At times, the two approaches will be used to offer different perspectives and understandings of education quality; Lieberman (2005) refers to this as complementarity between quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative investigation will also shed light on matters relating to the fidelity of implementation of the policy under study.

In this study, therefore, the results of the quantitative analysis will be corroborated with the findings from the qualitative analysis. It is conceivable that no effect of the programme may be detected through the quantitative study and yet the qualitative investigation may suggest effects on school processes and education quality. A form of triangulation (Lieberman, 2005) is therefore facilitated through the mixed method approach. Finally, the qualitative investigation will facilitate a contextualised

interpretation of the quantitative findings, may correct for measurement error of education quality through a contextual exploration of the concept and in so doing enhance construct validity (the extent to which the indicator reflects or correlates with the theorised concept).

Understanding what determines impacts depends in a fundamental sense on how the policy is implemented by those responsible for its delivery. Implementation is key. It is in this sense that frontline implementers, or to use Lipsky's language, 'street-level bureaucrats', form public policy (Lipsky 1980). Lipsky (1980:xii) argues that 'public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators, because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers'. Rather than formal laws and policy statutes it is 'the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures that effectively become the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky 1980:xii). These policymaking roles are based on the relatively high degree of discretion involved in implementation and relative autonomy from organisational authority.

Fixsen et al. (2005:69) characterises the implementation challenge as 'moving from science to service' in order to 'transform human service systems'. The science is provided from the research on effective interventions and programmes and the service is provided through implementation. Only when both are effective can improvements in education outcomes be expected. Understanding implementation in the context of decentralisation reform is particularly important given the obstacles and pitfall along the way (Faguet and Pöschl 2015).

3.4.2. Qualitative and quantitative methods used

To assess the effect of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) on indicators of education quality, I draw on the programme evaluation and econometrics' literature to develop an analytical strategy appropriate for the available data and context of the PSIP (Imbens and Wooldridge 2009; Blundell and Costa Dias 2009; Angrist and Pischke 2015). Using school administrative data over an eight-year period from 2007/8 to 2014/15, I use quasi-experimental methods to estimate the effect of the PSIP on four

3. Research context and methodological approach

indicators of education quality: exam pass rate, pupils who drop out from school, pupils who repeat a class and the number of female pupils per pit latrine. Details of how I exploit the phased roll out of the PSIP over four years, using a standard difference-in-difference model are presented in Chapter 5, together with the broader analytical strategy and potential threats to the econometric identification. I now turn to the qualitative methods.

I use semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions and documentary review to explore the concepts of education decentralisation and education quality in the Malawian context (see research sub-questions in Chapter 1, section 1.3). These data collection methods allow me to gather insights and generate an understanding of individuals' and groups' experiences, opinions and contrasting perspectives of the phenomena under study (Bryman 2012). Details of who was interviewed and participated in focus group discussions, how these were carried out and subsequently analysed are included in Chapters 4 and 6.

I use a case study approach, in four schools, as the main qualitative method to investigate the relationship between the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) and education quality (research sub-question 3). The approach allows the development of a fuller understanding of context than is possible from the limited indicators available for large scale quantitative analysis, and to illuminate both policy and contextual effects on school processes, rather than limited to quantitative indicators of education quality. The case study is the method which is typically used for examining social processes and behaviour within specific contextual settings (Ragin and Becker 1992; Yin 1993).

Case study research may lead to new perspectives on old theoretical issues, the discovery of new phenomena, and the development of new concepts and theoretical perspectives. Some of this work provides a detailed description of a setting, illustrates important concepts, fills in the dynamic details of how things influence each other, uncovers reasons and meanings behind behaviours or attitudes, and challenges existing theories and stereotypes. (McTavish and Loether 2002:182)

As the quote by McTavish and Loether (2002) illustrates, case study research can provide detailed description and analysis of interconnected influences and relationships in a school and how these may or may not relate to changes in policy.

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The case study approach adopted in this study is comparative. This allows me to combine the in-depth exploration of a limited number of cases with a comparison between two schools already participating as part of phase 1 of the PSIP and two schools that are yet to begin their full implementation of the PSIP. In this sense, the case studies nest within the quantitative study which uses the phased roll out of the PSIP to compare changes in quantitative indicators of education quality in schools that adopt the PSIP early with those included in the final phase of the roll out (research sub-question 2).²⁸

Primary documentary sources were an important part of the research and they supplemented interview data. In this endeavour, various policy documents published by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Local Government in Malawi were particularly important. Documents relating to international donor support to education in Malawi were useful as were documents focusing on issues related to decentralisation and, more specifically, to education decentralisation in Malawi. One important purpose of the documentary review was to triangulate interview respondents' perspectives with evidence drawn from secondary sources.

Building on the empiricist vs interpretivist discussion in the previous section, it has been argued that the relative benefits and disadvantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods are, to an extent, misleading based on set perceptions of the two types of research methods (Alasuutari 1995). Qualitative methods, like case studies, are often dealing with attempts to unravel and explain unique events or phenomena - they are valuable as such and there is no need to try to explain the *existence* of the events or phenomena under investigation. As Alasuutari explains, 'if all readers of a study can recognise a phenomenon from the description presented, then generalisability is not a problem' (1995:145). In this research, investigations through a case study method were thought likely to reveal information and original data about specific local contexts that would be insightful and illuminative of larger national issues (Marshall and Rossman 1989).

Similarly, issues relating to validity and reliability of qualitative data can present problems for qualitative researchers since these data can be seen as 'soft' and subjective. The idea of any sort of quality assessment in qualitative studies through terms such as validity or reliability can be controversial (see for instance Bryman 2012). Nonetheless

²⁸ Further discussion on the case study design and its analytical approach as well as the quantitative approach used are presented in chapters 5 and 6.

these terms have some utility as a means of considering the robustness of a study (Miles and Huberman 1994; Lewis and Ritchie 2003).

The *reliability* of the study is here conceived as the appropriateness of the research tools and their consistent and stable implementation (Miles and Huberman 1994). In the current study, consistent data collection was supported by the semi-structured character of the interview topic guides, which ensured that similar questions and topics were raised with all participants. Analysis, as demonstrated in the subsequent empirical chapters, was rigorous, systematic and detailed. Although a single researcher (the author) undertook much of the data collection and all of the analysis, the use of a research assistant (section 3.4.3) to collect some of the data could pose a threat to the consistency of the interviewing process. To mitigate this risk, a detailed training guide was prepared by the author (see Appendix 9.2 with discussion in the next section).

The *validity* of the study's findings can be construed as the extent to which there is correspondence between the study's analytic assertions and the phenomena which it is attempting to capture (Hammersley 1991) – or, as Lewis and Ritchie (2003:270) suggest simply, whether the findings and analysis are 'well-grounded'. Validity is derived from all aspects of the research process, such as the nature of the selection and the quality of the data collection process (Lewis and Ritchie 2003). Nonetheless much focus is upon the quality of analytic interpretation. Two layers of interpretation – interpretations by the participant and by the researcher - can both potentially create bias. Participants may offer a distorted account which presents a favourable image of themselves or their behaviour (Miles and Huberman 1994; Bourdieu 1999). The researcher's own interpretations of data may also be subject to bias (Miles and Huberman 1994), including, as already alluded to, over-emphasis on pre-existing theoretical conceptions, cultural assumptions or the temptation to include only data which favourably supports an emerging theory. A discussion of these potential biases was an explicit part of the pre-fieldwork training. An overview of how I approached the fieldwork and worked with and through a research assistant is presented in the next section.

There is no simple solution to the challenges of achieving a 'valid' interpretation of qualitative data. Several approaches were utilised with the intention of ensuring a level of robustness. First, probing within interviews was used to explore and check initial understandings. Second, the researcher attempted to achieve a reflexive and self-critical

attitude to the interpretation of text and to the attribution of meaning to informants' accounts (Seale 1999) – an attitude which was enacted through repeated checking and reflection upon the construal of data and the empirical groundedness of findings (Flick 2002). Third, discrepant accounts or findings were explored and their implications for theory construction considered (Miles and Huberman 1994). The presentation of findings in the following chapters is, fourthly, illustrated by frequent direct reference to informants' own words and statements. The intention of such references is to present to the reader the descriptions within participants' accounts, and to display how analytic constructions emerged from the empirical data. In this sense, the analytic process and empirical data are offered to scrutiny, so that the reader may assess the validity of the interpretative process (Lewis and Ritchie 2003; Snape and Spencer 2003).

Finally, there is the issue of the *generalisability* of findings. It is, of course, not possible to make statistical generalisations to a population from a qualitative study of this kind in which a small selection of participants has been purposively selected (Bryman 2012). It is clear, however, that quantitative and qualitative techniques can be combined to produce multi-method designs and that both have their respective strengths and weaknesses. In this study, the qualitative findings can support the development of theoretical or analytical generalisations about social processes which may inform understanding of other situations and settings (Firestone 1993; Miles and Huberman 1994; Bryman 2012). Furthermore, the complementarity between the qualitative and quantitative research designs allows for the interpretation of the qualitative findings alongside the statistical estimations derived from the quantitative analysis.

3.4.3. Fieldwork: process, limitations and ethics

I lived in Malawi from 2008 to 2010, working closely with the Ministry of Education on the piloting of grants to primary schools and on the plans and guidelines for the scaled-up national policy – the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP).²⁹ This experience and the contacts I developed while based in Malawi, enabled me to recruit a

²⁹ I returned to Malawi in November 2011 to attend the education Joint Sector Review – themed “Decentralisation for Quality Education” – and sought feedback on my PhD plans from Ministry of Education and donor officials. The PhD outline was well received with a suggestion that the results may provide a useful evidence base to inform future policy decisions related to primary school finance and decentralisation.

very capable research assistant.³⁰ My Malawi experience helped facilitate access to key informants, the case study schools as well as to the school administrative data used for the quantitative analysis.

I carried out the fieldwork in two phases. First in January 2013 focused on the recruitment and training of my research assistant as well as addressing sub-question one (understanding education decentralisation) and an initial exploration into understanding education quality. The second phase took place in May and June 2013, focused on the four school case studies, addressing sub-question three (the relationship between different perspectives of education quality and the PSIP).

Whilst overall, the fieldwork was completed as planned, there were a number of logistical challenges with accessing some of the case study schools which, in one case, resulted in the need to change one of the pre-selected cases while in the field (see section 6.1.1 for more detail). These practical challenges are not unusual limitations when conducting fieldwork in a rural context in sub-Saharan Africa.

To ensure a common understanding of the research agenda and to prepare and reflect on possible themes and challenges, including ethical considerations, the research assistant and I worked through one and a half days of training material which I had prepared for the purpose (see Appendix 9.2 for an extract from the research training guide). The purpose was to allow us to explore and discuss some of the key concepts related to the research topic, including our own preconceptions about the concepts and expectations of what we may or may not expect to find through the fieldwork. I wanted the research assistant to be a partner in the research project and for this she needed to understand my perspectives and rationale for the research.

The training was also designed to increase the validity and reliability of the research process, including guiding an appropriate translation of the topic guides. We reviewed data collection techniques, tips for interviews and discussed issues that could lead to bias in the research. In this regard, four main limitations or challenges were highlighted together with a discussion on how, as researchers, we could respond (see Table 3).

³⁰ The research assistant has Masters-level experience in research and we had worked together for a Non-Government Organisation in Malawi, including on preparations for the PSIP.

Table 3 Potential limitations during the fieldwork and the researchers' response

Theme	Challenge	Response discussed
Behaviour change	A respondent changes their behaviour in the presence of the researcher.	Where possible triangulate information; methodological triangulation (Clarke 1999)
Researcher as "outsider"	The researcher is not from the community being researched and can never fully know or understand what is or is not authentic.	Working through a Malawian research assistant mitigates, in part, against the expatriate "outsider". In addition, the Research Assistant is from one of the districts where one of the case studies will take place, allowing her to use her own mother tongue. We also stressed the importance of being open to learn; research as a learning experience.
Positive outcome bias	Given our roles in some of the early piloting of the precursor to PSIP, both the Research Assistant and I may be more likely to see and emphasise what is positive about school grants.	Awareness of this is the first step to addressing it as a challenge. We emphasised the importance of being true to what we hear and observe.
Respondent bias	Respondents tell us what they think we want to hear rather than what they really think or feel.	Encourage respondents to feel free and to say whatever they think. It is a research project rather than an inspection.

Citing his experience of qualitative educational research in Nigeria, Stephens (1990) makes explicit the challenges of context, language and being an outsider as issues to address before going into the field. The position of the researcher as an outsider is accentuated in the Malawi context involving cultural difference as well as power imbalances that result from contrasting socio-economic contexts and the likely association participants make between an expatriate researcher and development assistance. This called for a level of reflexivity on my part both to be aware of these differences and imbalances and look for ways to normalise social contact. I did this through a thorough explanation of the research process in each field site, by splitting the fieldwork across two visits and by making a clear my role as an independent researcher. Working alongside and through a Malawian research assistant helped mitigate these challenges.

3. Research context and methodological approach

During the first phase of the fieldwork, the research participants were government, donor and NGO officials based mainly in the capital city, Lilongwe. At the case study schools, participants were school and district education staff, community leaders and parents. There were no children involved in the research nor particular vulnerable groups targeted. To ensure compliance with ethical guidelines, I received approval from the LSE Research Degrees Unit and from the Ministry of Education in Malawi. During the fieldwork, I followed normal practice in terms of full disclosure and informed consent allowing participants the right to withdraw at any time while ensuring their identities are protected through anonymity – see Appendix 9.3 for an example of the consent form used at the case study schools. On completion of the second phase of the fieldwork, I sent a short report on initial findings to the relevant Ministry of Education officials.

As someone who lived and worked in Malawi within an international donor context and on the policy reform under study (the Primary School Improvement Programme), reference to positionality is important. Sultana (2007:380) suggests that it is ‘critical to pay attention to positionality, reflexivity, the production of knowledge and the power relations that are inherent in research processes in order to undertake ethical research.’ Whilst I could have been considered “an insider” whilst living and working in Malawi prior to the PhD, throughout the research, I adopted an outsider’s position in relation to the object(s) of study whilst using my existing networks and socio-cultural knowledge to facilitate access and strengthen rapport with participants. I use my in-depth knowledge of education in Malawi to bring analytical insight and contextual understanding to the analysis of the findings. Positionality ‘reflects the position that the researcher has chosen to adopt *within* a given research study’ (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013:71).

4. UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION DECENTRALISATION IN MALAWI

This chapter explores the nature of education decentralisation in Malawi, addressing the first sub-question: how is education decentralisation understood in Malawi? Drawing on a documentary review and empirical analysis, the chapter explores why education decentralisation has evolved as it has since the democratic transition in 1994, paying attention to the role of international donors. The chapter brings together the literature discussed in Chapter 2 with Malawi's political economy background presented in Chapter 3. By probing how education decentralisation is understood from different perspectives and discussing the potential contradictions within and between these perspectives, this chapter provides a deep contextual grounding for the remaining empirical chapters that follow on the relationship between decentralisation and primary education quality in Malawi.

The chapter starts with a review of policy in Malawi, exploring how decentralisation was intended to function and an overview of current practice.³¹ Building on the overview and justification for a mixed methods approach presented in Chapter 3, a detailed presentation of the methods used to explore the nature of education decentralisation in Malawi is presented in section 4.2. The empirical findings are then discussed, framed around three themes: rationale; resistance; and donor influence. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and in conclusion suggests the following argument.

The transition to multiparty democracy in 1994 involved pressure from both citizens and donors for increased decentralisation both to strengthen citizen participation and democratic decision-making as well as to improve public service delivery. Parliament passed the Local Government Act in 1998 and implementation of its accompanying National Decentralisation Policy began (Government of Malawi 1998). Democratic devolution subsequently stalled in 2005 but with significant financial support from international donors, aspects of education decentralisation went ahead, including the

³¹ Important to note that the implementation of decentralisation policies and programmes continues to evolve in Malawi. Whilst reference is made to some more recent changes and developments throughout this thesis, "current practice" in this chapter is situated within the timeframe of the fieldwork undertaken (2013/14).

introduction of the Primary School Improvement Programme as a form of school-based management reform.

A number of contradictions and tensions result. Despite an initial intent to devolve power to district councils, Malawi's decentralisation effort can now be described as deconcentration rather than devolution. While deconcentration may provide the scope for improvements in service delivery, it does little for local democracy and a genuine transfer of power.

In the education sector, there is an appearance of alignment between donors and citizens, as donor funds are channelled through government systems into school bank accounts (the Primary School Improvement Programme), facilitating more community control over resources and decision-making at the school level. While this may affect education quality at the school level (to be explored in Chapters 5 and 6), it could also undermine the broader efforts on democratic devolution, and local accountability.

4.1. FROM PAPER TO PRACTICE: DECENTRALISATION REFORM IN MALAWI

To examine how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi, it is important first to consider how decentralisation policy was intended to work and now works in practice.³² This section therefore starts with an overview of the aims and overall intention of decentralisation in Malawi, before looking at how it works in practice and, specifically, in education. The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) was presented in Chapter 3 and this section will conclude with a brief overview of two additional decentralised financing initiatives, both similar in nature to the PSIP.

4.1.1. Decentralisation on paper

Political liberalisation in sub-Saharan Africa has been linked with significant donor financing aimed at promoting growth and reducing poverty through ‘good governance’ (Olowu and Wunsch 2004) (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.6, for further discussion). Dependent on Washington institutions during the democratic transition (Harrigan 2001; Ndegwa and Levy 2004), Malawi committed itself in 1994 to the twin goals of alleviating poverty and building a viable democracy. This resulted in constitutional provisions for decentralising government.

Box 1 National decentralisation policy

The 1998 National Decentralisation Policy sets out to (Government of Malawi 1998):

- devolve administration and political authority to the district level
- integrate governmental agencies at the district and local levels into one administrative unit, transferring implementing responsibilities from the centre to the districts
- assign functions and responsibilities to the various levels of government; and
- promote popular participation in the governance and development of districts

³² See footnote 31, regarding timeframe.

4. Understanding education decentralisation in Malawi

In 1998 the Local Government Act and accompanying National Decentralisation Policy set out to achieve decentralisation and to make public services more effective (Government of Malawi 1998). As presented in Box 1, the objectives of the National Decentralisation Policy included the creation of a democratic environment and institutions, the promotion of accountability and good governance and the mobilisation of the masses for socio-economic development (Government of Malawi 1998). Alongside the policy commitments and with financial support from a broad range of international donors, a National Decentralisation Programme was set up to support implementation.

Based on the Local Government Act, local government is formally made up of a council, council committees and the council secretariat (Government of Malawi, 1998).³³ The council is designated as the main political decision-making body and should be comprised of elected local councillors and MPs as voting members and of Traditional Authorities³⁴ and five representatives of special-interest groups as non-voting ex-officio members (O’Neil et al. 2014). The inclusion of Traditional Authorities in the set-up of local government illustrates the efforts made to incorporate traditional forms of local governance (based on inheritance) into the formal structures of local government.

The executive component of local government is headed by the District Commissioner³⁵ and heads of sectors (including education), who together form the District Executive Committee (DEC). The National Decentralisation Policy specifies the following functions to be devolved to councils in the education sector: nurseries and kindergartens, primary schools and distance education centres (Government of Malawi 1998). Central government retains control of secondary and tertiary education (see Table 4) and has a role to support councils with policy guidance, financial and technical assistance. The Ministry of Education therefore retains responsibility for policy formulation and enforcement, inspectorate, establishment of standards, training, curriculum development and international representation.

³³ Malawi has a single tier of local government comprising 28 district councils, 4 cities, 2 municipal councils and 1 town council. They are all on the same level with no subsidiary / supervisory structure. For simplicity, this study will only refer to “district” councils and to structures which are common across all four entities.

³⁴ Traditional Authorities act as custodians of the cultural and traditional values of the community. They have the control of customary land ensuring that authority over land is passed in succession from one generation to another. They also perform a semi-judicial function settling customary disputes over land. They also exercise a lot of influence over their constituents mobilizing the people to participate in local developmental activities.

³⁵ Chief Executive Officer in municipalities, cities or towns.

4.1.2. Decentralisation in practice

In practice, the distribution of formal authority and responsibilities, between central and local government, has been shaped by the *implementation* of the National Decentralisation Policy since 1998. Indeed, as Davies et al. (2003) suggest, there is a difference between decentralisation policy and structures and its implementation in practice.

Democratic decentralisation or devolution began with local council elections and the restoration of councils in 2000 (see Box 2 for timeline), while fiscal and administrative decentralisation has taken a phased approach. An assessment of the implementation of education decentralisation in 2011 states:

Obviously, a far-reaching transformation of the governance system such as decentralisation is a highly political reform process that requires careful and incremental adjustments. [...] Such a politically and technically highly complex reform endeavour therefore cannot be expected to be accomplished swiftly in a short period of time. It is rather an ongoing process, in which the Government of Malawi has made major progress with [...] the devolution of service delivery functions from line ministries to the District Councils. (Nampota and Beckman 2011:11)

The report goes on to state that the nature of decentralisation in Malawi could be described as deconcentration rather than devolution (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.1 for further discussion). Indeed, amendments to the Local Government Act in 2001 and 2010, and to the Local Government Elections Act in 2010, took back some powers to central government. District Commissioners are now selected and appointed by the Office of the President and Cabinet and the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development rather than by the councils (O'Neil et al. 2014). MPs became voting members of councils in 2010 and the terms for council chairs were reduced from five years to one year (O'Neil et al. 2014).

Democratic devolution stalled when President Bingu Mutharika decided against holding local elections in 2005. In the absence of locally elected councillors since 2005, alternative processes, ad hoc structures and the recentralisation of political authority have prevailed (O'Neil et al. 2014). These ad hoc structures are indicative of the differences

between the design of decentralisation in Malawi and what happens in practice (Davies et al. 2003). O’Neil et al. (2014:23) argue that the ‘informality and non-legal status [of the ad hoc district structures] reflect the powerlessness of citizens vis-à-vis the local executive’.

Box 2 (Education) decentralisation timeline in Malawi

1994	First multiparty elections; Muluzi elected President
1998	Local Government Act; National Decentralisation Policy; President Muluzi re-elected
2000	Local government elections to appoint local councillors
2001	Post of District Education Manager created
2004	President Bingu Mutharika elected
2005	Local government elections postponed
2006	Office of the President and Cabinet disbands high-level group driving decentralisation
2008	Guidelines for the management of education functions devolved to District Assemblies published
2009	President Bingu Mutharika re-elected for a second term
2010	Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP): phase 1 implementation starts
2011	Education Joint Sector Review: “Fast-tracking education decentralisation”
2012	Management and resources for teaching and learning materials devolved to districts; President Mutharika dies; Joyce Banda takes over as President
2014	Peter Mutharika, younger brother of Bingu, defeats Joyce Banda in Presidential election

Clarifying functions, responsibilities and lines of accountability had been part of the objectives of decentralisation reform (see Box 1). The intention was to avoid ‘dual administration’ whereby district-level staff responsible for public services, including education and health, have dual reporting lines; one to the District Commissioner and

another to a central government authority. These two reporting lines weaken accountability and can lead to situations where if the District Education Manager does not want to cooperate with the District Commissioner, s/he can find ways to bypass him or her.

Table 4 Division of functions between central and local government in education

Central government (Ministry of Education, service commission)	Local government / council secretariat
<p><i>Whole sector (excluding early childhood):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Setting policy and standards ▪ Regulation, monitoring, inspection and evaluation ▪ National projects ▪ Human resources (recruitment, discipline, deployment) ▪ Payroll ▪ Capital investment ▪ Management of donor funds <p><i>Secondary and tertiary education:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recurrent expenditure and procurement ▪ Data collection ▪ Monitoring standards 	<p><i>Whole sector (excluding early childhood):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ (Participatory) planning and budgeting ▪ Monitoring examinations ▪ Teacher loans and allowances <p><i>Primary education:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recurrent expenditure and procurement (except text books) ▪ Data collection ▪ Monitoring standards ▪ Capital investment through the Local Development Fund and Constituency Development Fund ▪ Pupil enrolment and transfers

Source: adapted from Nampota and Beckman (2011)

Sectors began to develop decentralisation plans and guidelines but by 2005, only three ministries (education, health and agriculture) had actually transferred any functions. Of these, education and health are considered to have decentralised the furthest (O’Neil et al. 2014). The education guidelines were published in 2008 (see timeline, Box 2), 10 years after the policy was approved. The guidelines set out information and guidance to District Councils on how to fulfil the functions assigned to district level and below (Government of Malawi 2008b). Table 4 provides a summary of the division of responsibilities and functions between central and local government in 2013. It shows that, contrary to the legal mandate and vision of local government, central government still retains key

functions in primary education, including teacher recruitment, deployment and pay. In both primary and secondary education, each school is expected to have a School Management Committee (SMC) and Parent Teachers Association (PTA). In addition to their oversight function, these locally elected groups are expected to support the schools with fundraising, planning and budgeting for school-level activities.

4.1.3. Decentralisation financing initiatives

Despite the commitment to devolve fiscal functions, total spending by local governments has remained low, both in absolute figures and in terms of a share of public spending in Malawi as a whole. While the Local Government Act mandates that 5 per cent of government discretionary spending should be directed through councils, in the 2013/14 budget presented to parliament, local governments were budgeted to receive only 3.9 per cent of total government expenditure and net lending (Government of Malawi 2013a). Given that these funds are expected to pay for the running costs of district offices (e.g. travel, fuel, stationery and allowances), it is unlikely that any significant sums are available for other recurrent activity.

The bulk of funding reaching local levels sits within sectors and for education a significant proportion of the funding has been provided through sector budget support³⁶ from a range of international donors. This is the channel through which donors fund the Primary School Improvement Programme. Indeed, a 2013 report from the UK Department for International Development finds progress towards decentralisation of management and financing of primary education to be ‘satisfactory’ on the basis that: ‘large proportion of the resources for primary education devolved in increased allocations to district councils, under the 2011/12 budget’ and ‘2228 schools received School Improvement Grants in 2011/12 and another 3,069 schools received Direct Support to Schools’ grants’ (DFID 2012:5).

In practice, however, O’Neil et al. (2014) comment that these forms of ring-fenced and sector-specific finance have had little positive impact on local government control or use of funds, on local-level accountability mechanisms, or on empowering local authorities

³⁶ On budget financial aid provided by donors to a specific sector (e.g. education) is known as sector budget support. For further discussion, see Handley (2009). See Chapter 3, section 3.3.3.

with regard to discretionary budgeting or local revenues (O'Neil et al. 2014). Although sector budget support is partly intended to support decentralisation in education (including through the PSIP), an unintended consequence is that it leads to a greater focus on central level planning and accountability from central government to international donors.

Perhaps because of the stalled and limited fiscal decentralisation, two decentralised financing initiatives are being implemented (in addition to the Primary School Improvement Programme). The Local Development Fund (LDF) has become the main source of discretionary funding at the local level with a focus on community involvement in decision-making and project oversight. The Constituency Development Fund (CDF), on the other hand, is the result of political expedience in the mid-2000s when President Bingu Mutharika needed the support of MPs and agreed to their proposal (O'Neil et al. 2014).

Replacing the Malawi Social Action Fund, the LDF aims 'to empower local communities to take part in the decision-making processes through improved local governance and development management, in order to reduce poverty and improve service delivery' (Government of Malawi 2009b:1). Funded mainly by international donors (almost 80 per cent in 2011/12) (Lockwood and Kang 2012:12), LDF projects are supposed to be community managed, with a local committee established to oversee funds, procurement and the building of infrastructure.

The LDF has been used extensively in education to build classrooms and teachers' houses (see sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.3 for further discussion). For these LDF projects, communities are expected to provide a 25 per cent "community contribution" so as to signal their 'acceptance to participate' (Kalondolondo 2013:11). Such contributions tend to be in the form of sand, bricks, quarry stones or support for digging the structure's foundations. A 2013 report into the construction of classrooms using the LDF, suggests significant variation in community participation between schools and points to different methods used to encourage it. One reason given for more community participation in rural rather than urban schools include the power of the Traditional Authorities in rural areas who are able to ensure that 'their bye-laws are accepted by their subjects and [they] have the powers to impose sanctions on disobedient subjects' (Kalondolondo 2013:12).

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There are a number of similarities between the approach taken by the LDF and the provision of school grants as part of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP). In fact, as a precursor to the PSIP, the LDF set an example of how public funds could be channelled down to local levels with communities having the authority (on paper) to manage the monies. Just as the LDF exists in part because of the stalled decentralisation process overall, in particular in terms of fiscal decentralisation, so the PSIP was set up in order to speed up the process of decentralisation within the education sector. Both initiatives are unlikely to have been introduced without financial support from international donors.

The CDF is voted by parliament annually for all its members and is formally managed by District Commissioners. In practice, MPs tend to treat the monies as their own, often with scant regard for local development plans and priorities. Interviews undertaken by O'Neil et al. suggest that the MPs do not involve ordinary citizens in CDF planning (O'Neil et al. 2014:38). The CDF programme therefore appears to run counter to the government's professed objective of strengthening local government and its capacity to meet local needs. It operates outside of the formal planning, budgeting and spending framework, rather than encouraging more transparent and accountable processes.

4.2. METHODS

This section provides detail on the methodological process followed to explore how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi. The section includes some reflection and justification for the methods used but most of these issues were covered in the overview of the methods presented in Chapter 3 (section 3.4).

Primary data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews by me and complemented by secondary data from a review of relevant journal articles and grey literature. Fourteen interviews (including one preliminary interview) and seven informal discussions were carried out between January and June 2013 (see section 4.2.2 for further discussion of the sample).

In-depth qualitative interviews were an appropriate tool through which to gather data about how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi. Such interviews can enable rich insights into individuals' experiences, opinions and feelings (May 2011; Bryman 2012). They offer the opportunity to explore individuals' "personal worldview" (Gaskell 2000:46), and to consider how they frame and understand particular phenomena (Bryman 2012). In-depth interviews offer the specific possibility of identifying chronology and process (Gaskell 2000; May 2011).

The semi-structured nature of the interview was purposefully used to explore different dimensions of decentralisation and enabled the interviewer to investigate issues of particular theoretical and policy interest (Bryman 2012). The semi-structured approach, by which the same topics and questions were raised with all participants, had the additional benefit of consistency, thus enabling comparisons between participant accounts and across institutional type (e.g. government, donor, NGO).

The objective of the semi-structured interviews, therefore, was to achieve a balance of freedom and structure, openness and focus. Two particular strategies were helpful. First, the design of the interview schedule provided both the space for open-ended accounts, and the opportunity to focus on specific issues as necessary. Second, a reflexive and flexible approach to the conduct of interviews enabled the pursuit of emerging themes and the exploration of participants' own stories and perspectives (Robson 2002; Bryman 2012). Interviews rarely followed precisely the structure of the interview schedule, a flexibility which allowed rich, detailed and sometimes unexpected narratives to develop.

4.2.1. Topic Guide

The topic guide comprised two sections: decentralisation and education quality (see Appendix 9.5).³⁷ It was developed based primarily on my reading of the literature on decentralisation (Chapter 2) and Malawi (Chapter 3), it was designed to guide and not to restrict. The first section aimed to elicit different perspectives on how education decentralisation in Malawi is understood by the person interviewed, exploring the motivation and rationale for education decentralisation in Malawi followed by an exploration of participants' expectations of decentralisation in education. The first section of the topic guide concluded by exploring the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP). This enabled me to understand how the PSIP fits within the broader context.

One preliminary interview was carried out; based on the responses and flow of the interview, some changes were made to the topic guide. Language was simplified, questions re-ordered to improve flow and unclear questions removed. I also learnt the importance of encouraging respondents to share their own perspectives rather than to state formulaic answers based on what a respondent would think I wanted to hear. This is a challenge suggested by related research on decentralisation in Malawi (O'Neil et al. 2014). When asked how communities participate in district development planning, respondents often described how the system *should* work rather than how it works *in reality* (O'Neil et al. 2014). I was interested in understanding both how decentralisation should work and its reality in practice and was therefore careful to explore both these perspectives during interview. By asking specifically for respondents' own opinions and perspectives, I aimed to increase the chances that what I was hearing through the interviews was authentic.

4.2.2. Sample

Participants were selected to provide rich and diverse sources of information on decentralisation from different perspectives: central government, district education, civil society and donor. Of the twenty-one participants, nine were from central government (Ministry of Education and Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development), six from donor agencies, three from one rural district and three from NGOs working in

³⁷ Discussion on the methods used to understand education quality are presented in Chapter 6.

education. It is important to note that “donor agencies” are not a homogenous group but rather each donor has its distinct view and areas of priority focus (see Chapter 3, section 3.3.3 for details). The donors sampled for interview, however, were all involved in support for the PSIP and therefore had a degree of common interest in its success. Fourteen of the respondents were male, seven female. See Appendix 9.4 for an anonymised list of the participants and their institutional affiliations.

The descriptive nature of this exploration into education decentralisation and the focus on policy and context suggested that participants would be most suitably drawn from relatively senior policy-related positions. I was also able to use my knowledge of the context and the participants themselves, to target senior officials who were also aware of the realities within communities. Three of the participants were based in a rural district; the remaining participants lived and worked in Lilongwe.

The interviews lasted approximately forty-five minutes to one hour and were conducted in English by me. They were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Notes were taken by me both during and after each interview. These set down emerging themes, contextual information and questions or prompts for me to follow up in subsequent interviews. For the seven informal discussions, no topic guide or recording was used and I relied only on the notes I took.

4.2.3. Analysis

The combination of fourteen interviews and seven informal discussions produced a volume of detailed and rich text. Familiarity with this data was achieved through multiple close readings of each transcript and set of notes. Once a level of familiarity had been achieved, a thematic analysis was undertaken: transcripts were reviewed closely, and emerging themes and phenomena of interest within the text were highlighted. These highlights were then clustered under thematic headings and organised in an Excel spreadsheet.

Themes arose from two sources. First, they were derived from the insights and theories around education decentralisation identified in Chapter 2. Second, themes were derived directly from participants’ accounts to capture emerging ideas and issues of importance. Over time, and with reflection, themes were consolidated, refined and reviewed. Using

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the consolidated spreadsheet and following detailed consideration and thematic coding of individual transcripts, there was a concentrated and iterative process of comparison between participants' accounts in order to explore similarities and contrasts and to confirm the emerging analytical themes (Miles and Huberman 1994; Bryman 2012).

As an example of this progression towards thematic generalisation, participants spoke of the challenges to decentralisation in Malawi in terms of politicians not wanting to relinquish power and resources from their control and of the Ministry of Education keen to set the policy agenda, which in turn was categorised as belonging to a general explanatory finding that resistance to decentralisation was multi-faceted. It is through such a process that rationale, resistance and donor influence became the dominant themes to frame the findings with issues of politics, policy and power interwoven throughout.

4.3. UNDERSTANDING EDUCATION DECENTRALISATION IN MALAWI

Three themes frame the presentation of the qualitative findings in suggesting how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi: rationale, resistance and donor influence. In summary, the findings, which present participants' perceptions of decentralisation, suggest that decentralisation in Malawi has both a political and technical rationale: to promote accountability and 'good governance' in the newly democratic Malawi at the same time as improving the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery. As indicated in Chapter 3, the intent soon met resistance. Politicians have felt the competitive pressure of multiparty democracy and technocrats have been reluctant to transfer resources down to lower levels of the system. Despite the challenges and, in some cases, in spite of them, a broad range of international donors have continued to promote and finance decentralisation efforts, including in education. As an initiative to 'fast-track' education decentralisation, the Primary School Improvement Programme is a central part of donors' efforts to support education in Malawi.

4.3.1. Rationale

To sustain pressure on the incumbent Kamuzu Banda in the build-up to the referendum on multiparty elections in 1993 and the elections themselves in 1994, Bakili Mulizi, the eventual victor at the polls, used the rallying cry *mphamvu kwa anthu* ("power to the people") to stir up popular support. Malawians were told that this was the essence of democracy and the findings suggest that decentralisation was considered a mechanism to transform this political aspiration into reality.

Multiparty sort of freed everybody. They wanted to talk more and get more involved. (Donor Agency, female)

After the state-controlled experience under Banda, during which time everything was kept "under microscope", the advent of democracy started people talking about the "grassroots and better services, getting involved in decision-making" (Donor Agency, female).

One of the reasons why we had [a] referendum in 1993 was that people thought that they were being side-lined. It was just the selected few that

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were taking part in the decision-making process. [...] these are our own resources, these are the taxes we are paying but then we are not taking part in terms of what we want to happen. (District Government official, male)

At the same time, the advent of multiparty democracy brought challenges. Malawians did not make the link between the concept of “power to the people” and the responsibility it entails (Central Government official, male). In the past, under Banda, Malawians countrywide would participate in a week of local development projects, including building and rehabilitating schools, as part of an annual “Youth Week”. After 1994, Youth Week was described as *tangarta* (“forced labour”); the “spirit of self-help” was gone.

People abandoned the concept of participation in terms of rural development. [...] Decentralisation was now to say, let's bring back that spirit of self-help. (Central Government official, male)

In this sense, decentralisation was being used to change the mindset of people in terms of encouraging responsibility; as one respondent said, “we need to culture [democracy]” (Central Government official, male).

The technical discussions on decentralisation policy and how this would be rolled out in practice “lagged behind the political rhetoric” (Civil society representative, male) but respondents did speak of the expected effect of decentralisation on the delivery of education services. Within the centralised system, “issues were taking too long to be resolved” because whether you were in Chitipa (the furthest northern district) or Nsanje (the most southern district), “the matters had to be referred to Lilongwe” (District Government official, male). One senior official in the Ministry of Education said: “it was proving a bit difficult to improve most of the services from the centre” (Central Government official, male).

From 1964 to that time in 1993, government was approaching development from the centre. [...] between that period, 1964 to around 1997, we created a lot of white elephants. I'm saying white elephants

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because it was like we were imposing things to the communities.

(Central Government official, male)

The findings suggest a belief that decentralisation offers an opportunity to improve efficiency, strengthen accountability and by increasing the level of decision-making and control over resources at the school level, enhance the sense of ownership felt by both school staff and the surrounding community. These all contribute to what some refer to as “improved service delivery”. It is not always clear what respondents are referring to by this concept, but some examples include classrooms constructed, materials delivered, needs met and education quality improved. An exploration of what is meant by education quality from different perspectives is presented in Chapter 6.

Two respondents from the donor community spoke of the time taken by the central Ministry of Education to make progress towards achieving a target of 3,000 primary school classrooms constructed between 2010 and 2014. In the first two years, 200 classrooms were completed with a further 500 under construction.

“Centralised school construction does not work” according to one of the donor respondents (Donor Agency, male). Since a decision was taken to use the Local Development Fund (LDF) to construct classrooms, much faster progress has been made, albeit with variation in the quality of the classrooms constructed (see Kalondolondo 2013).

The slow pace of classroom construction may be one indicator of poor service delivery. The inability of the centre to respond to local needs is another. For example, teaching and learning materials supplied to a school that does not need them while another school in need does not receive any.

I was also thinking that maybe the communities would have been suggesting of their needs and ideas for improving their schools to the government so that government reacts on what the needs of people are.

(District Government official, male)

What do we need most? Instead of the district saying what does the school need most. So, I feel that the school will answer that question in a more relevant way to themselves than the districts. They [the schools]

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can say ok since we have this money let's solve this and this. (Donor Agency, female)

A perception that the central Ministry of Education does not have the capacity to respond to local needs or deliver materials and infrastructure efficiently comes through strongly in the findings. The second quotation above also raises the question as to the level of decentralisation and whether more control should be given to schools relative to districts. This is an important question that invites further discussion (see section 4.4). Respondents suggest that local control and more participation from communities offer an alternative.

If you are looking at the number of schools that we have and whether the central government has the capacity to manage that [...] we were compromising a lot of things that perhaps could have been dealt at a community level. (Civil society representative, male)

In addition to a more responsive and efficient system, respondents suggest that more community participation and decisions made at district level or below, offer the chance for increased accountability in terms of the ability for schools and their communities to monitor and follow up on education matters. Communities promised new infrastructure by central government are kept waiting and are unable to exert pressure when nothing happens. Where a sufficient degree of authority for infrastructure is devolved to the district level, communities can more easily communicate their needs and to follow these up at the district level.

I think from 2001 to date, we have registered improvements. Because as a council you respond to the issues on the ground. Like if we have cases of this rainy season, schools most of them their roofs will be blown off. But we will attend to that because we have a corresponding budget within the council budget. [...] In the past schools in those circumstances will stay more than two to three years without being attended to. [...] Although there are still some functions at the centre, but I would say most of the functions now have gone to councils. So, what we are noticing that now the local communities are enjoying the benefits of decentralisation. Because they [...] come to this office and

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say this is what is happening, how do we do? So, there is a lot of engagement with us. (District Government official, male)

From the perspective of a District Education Manager, the quotation above does suggest that shifting the locus of control to districts (in terms of resourcing and decision-making) can increase the ability of communities to voice their concerns and have an effect on improved services (repairing infrastructure). A different perspective is offered by one of the NGO respondents who suggests that a lack of accountability is one of the weakest areas in the current education system which is why "accountability is one of the strongest reasons why we need [...] a decentralised system" (Civil society representative, male). The implication is that whatever degree of decentralisation that currently exists, it does not go far enough in terms of ensuring strengthened accountability relations through the system.

The [School Management Committee] SMC cannot hold teachers to account. The parents cannot hold the SMC to account. The community cannot go to their district council and ask why things are going down. District Councils cannot go to the national level and ask why things are going down. (Civil society representative, male)

It is unclear from this quotation what reasons lie behind this perception of weak or non-existent accountability relations and whether or not it is related to the stalled democratic decentralisation discussed earlier in the chapter. Faced with such challenges, respondents suggested that one of the aims of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) was to make faster progress with decentralisation, including improving local accountability.

[The] Primary School Improvement Programme gives power to schools to do their own yearly plan...they say that's one way of fast tracking [decentralisation] as it is to school. (Donor Agency, female)

Under the PSIP, schools and communities are expected to develop school improvement plans which are then resourced through grants channelled from central government, through districts and into school bank accounts. With oversight from the District Education Office, schools and communities have control over the accounts. One donor

suggests that this transfer of responsibility and ownership to the school level implies that accountability is shifted to the school level.

I guess at school level they decide what they want. They wouldn't blame anyone [...] It's more giving the responsibility to them and also they can decide and they prioritise. Of course, there's always an issue of what they want and like... And that's one thing [we] found with the grants as well most of them were saying we want to do infrastructure related renovations and rehabilitations whereas...you should do more on teaching and reading rather than infrastructure. (Donor Agency, female)

This quotation suggests a possible tension between the notion of local 'ownership' and responsibility for a school's improvement and making decisions on what is most likely to have an effect on the quality of education provided. This theme is picked up in more detail as I discuss education quality and its meaning in Chapter 6.

[The Primary School Improvement Programme is] really bringing much realisation of ownership of whatever is happening [and] finding ways of improving them. (District Government official, male)

...[when] schools are able to manage their own budget. They will feel more owning of the processes at a school level and the same happens at local assembly level. So I think for me the issue of ownership is important because ownership [...] means that the communities will be motivated to do the best out of it... (Civil society representative, male)

Findings suggest that channeling resources direct into school bank accounts (without reference to the size of the grants) does offer the potential for increased ownership and accountability at the school/community level.

...accountability is easier when there is money. Because where there's resources to control, people want to know what the materials are meant for, how they have been used and whether they have been used appropriately. [...] A [School Management Committee] without

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resources, what decisions can it make? If it makes decisions, what effect will it have? (Civil society representative, male)

The findings suggest that decentralisation in Malawi has both a political and technical rationale: to nurture the newly democratic Malawi and encourage responsibility and ownership of national development as well as to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of education services. It is suggested that accountability relations between communities, districts and the national level are weak and there is still some tension in terms of where the locus of decentralised authority best sits. With schools which can ‘solve’ and meet their own needs or with districts which are best place to respond to needs articulated by schools. The Primary School Improvement Programme is referenced as an important initiative within the education sector, with scope for deeper, more effective and *faster* decentralisation.

4.3.2. Resistance

It was noted in section 4.1 that decentralisation in Malawi is not working in practice as intended on paper. Initial political momentum stalled with delays in local council elections from 2005 and there have been ongoing attempts by central government to claw back control. Sector decentralisation lagged behind the initial political momentum and although progress has been made, important aspects of primary education are still controlled by the centre despite a commitment for these powers to be transferred to district level (e.g. teacher recruitment, deployment, payroll and discipline). The findings here shed further light on political and policy-related tensions which will enable a better understanding of the decentralisation context in Malawi within which the Primary School Improvement Programme is being implemented.

From all perspectives, respondents report a lack of political will in pushing ahead with decentralisation. Where initially there was a committee leading decentralisation reform within the Office of the President and Cabinet this has since been disbanded. There is no high level political force “driving” the process (Donor Agency, female). One respondent reported that government suggests it has been resistant to running local council elections since 2005 given the associated costs but this, he concluded, was more a question of prioritisation rather than a binding constraint:

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Malawi is very good at demonstrating, where there is a will, you can find the money (Civil society representative, male)

Illustrative of those who do not want to speak out or challenge authority, one district commissioner refused to comment on why local government elections have not taken place since 2005: “Mmmm, the one who is better placed to answer that question will be the Ministry [of Local Government and Rural Affairs]” (District Government official, male). A more candid central government official commented that the Bingu Mutharika government did not like decentralisation (Central Government official, male). More accurate still is the assertion that President Bingu Mutharika would lose political control through local council elections and therefore he chose to let these expire. This is an example of national level politics interfering with subnational decentralisation efforts.

A lack of political will is offered as a reason behind the stalled democratic devolution process but power related resistance also exists. Central bureaucrats are concerned about shifting power and resources away from their control. The District Education Manager explains that if a government decides to decentralise, then corresponding resources must also be decentralised. It is therefore a “question of power, thinking the centre is going to lose too [many] powers because most of the issues will be done at local level” (District Government official, male). There were also suggestions that central bureaucrats may fear losing their jobs and/or would not want to be transferred to rural areas as part of a human resource response to decentralisation.

I think there was some fear in terms of losing control. And staff fear being made redundant if roles are transferred to the districts. (Donor Agency, female)

I think where we have a problem is the technocrats – those are the groups that is having a bigger stake in terms of how fast we go, how slow we go. Sometimes indecision, sometimes deliberate. Keeping quiet is also a policy. Not doing anything is also a policy. Sometimes it is by choice that the government is not doing anything on something. And we need to understand really why it may not do certain things. (Civil society representative, male)

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The resistance shown by central bureaucrats suggests that they too have a stake in stalling further decentralisation. No respondents confirmed this resistance from their own perspective but instead frustration was voiced in terms of the inefficiencies associated with the continued central control of teacher payroll and teacher discipline. All matters relating to teacher indiscipline are managed at the central level: “you have to send a report to teaching service and it takes may be two years for the matter to be resolved” (District Government official, male).

The “mistrust between the centre and the low levels” (District Government official, male) also includes issues related to the capacity to manage increased levels of responsibility at district level:

*...resistance in terms of letting things go to the district ... and National Local Government Finance Committee...pushing the Ministry and saying you have to, you have to release. The districts will manage.
(Donor Agency, female)*

and school levels:

*And I recall in one of the meetings senior government officials raised the issue to say 'you know the community members are ignorant. They are illiterate sorry and how do you expect them to manage the grants'
(Civil society representative, male)*

According to a District Education Manager, in order for districts to manage the increased responsibilities, central government must ensure technical staff of sufficient grade and qualification are deployed at district level. This process began with the appointment of District Education Managers in 2001, most of whom were promoted from being secondary school head teachers. As such, they replaced a cadre of District Education Officers who were on the same grade as Primary Education Advisers.

So yes, the politicians may hinder the process, but then to a certain extent ourselves as technicians as well in the system would want to enjoy limitless privileges when we are not supposed to enjoy those privileges. [...] But if the system can have aggressive technicians,

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middle managers and senior managers who will stand their ground and say if this is going to work can we go ahead and do a, b, c. then I think things can work. (District Government official, male)

The findings also suggest a tension in terms of who sets the agenda on policy priorities. One Ministry of Education official recalls discussions that raised concerns over the transfer of resources to the district level. Colleagues, he suggested, were worried that “if we give these resources to the districts, we will make them more powerful and they will stop listening” (Central Government official, male). His response sheds light on how central government understands local level identification of needs and prioritisation and the extent to which the locus of control does, or at least should, rest with central government: so much so “that when the schools get the resources, people at the centre are double sure that the schools will implement [what they’re] supposed to” (Central Government official, male).

We [central Ministry] will set the agenda. It's not the councils setting their own agenda. It's the national level setting the agenda. [...] When the local communities are deliberating, they are looking at the government agenda as mainly the shopping list and say you may shop from this list. (Central Government official, male)

These control structures are reflected in the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) in which the priorities identified in a school improvement plan are expected to be aligned to the National Education Sector Plan priorities with a condition that the majority of the school grant be used to support improved quality and relevance of education.³⁸

Within the [PSIP] training package...there is a lot of discussion, empower school communities to how can they address quality and relevance issues. (Central Government official, male)

³⁸ As discussed in chapter 3, the three overarching priorities of the National Education Sector Plan are: quality and relevance; access and equity; governance and management. See footnotes 20 and 21 for further information on how central government used PSIP guidelines to align school prioritisation with central government strategy.

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Schools and communities are expected to plan and prioritise in line with nationally identified priorities and there is a structure for them to do this. However, despite this, there is a further tension between what should be prioritised in the pursuit of ‘quality’ education. Communities tend to look at hardware issues (maintenance and rehabilitation of infrastructure) rather than “the real quality issues” (Central Government official, male). Although not explicitly defined, the official suggested that an example of a real quality issue would be an appreciation of “how much teaching and learning is going on” (Central Government official, male). The discussion on the extent to which central priorities are aligned with local level actions and how this relates to different conceptualisations is developed further in Chapter 6.

Mostly those schools that have those committees with very low literacy levels, they are looking much at infrastructure... maybe they lack the knowledge to say what comprises a good school. (District Government official, male)

Although the training provided through the PSIP aims to “empower communities to focus on quality and relevance issues” (Central Government official, male), concern was expressed by two respondents that there is insufficient central support for the PSIP which would have an effect on how the programme is implemented.

They [districts/schools] are implementing, the challenge is the Ministry itself. (Central Government official, female)

I am not sure that [national oversight and support] is working as intended. There was no budget for coordination in 2011/12... The districts didn't really know what they should do with the money they received for support. (Donor Agency, female)

These concerns are reflected in a response from one of the donor respondents.

When we had a mission. ...instead of giving the grants to schools they were rehabilitating classrooms across the district... And all these communication issues from the local government. Districts not being

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*very sure about what funds have been sent to them or what they are for.
(Donor Agency, female)*

Another respondent suggested that a reluctance to decentralise the management of resources was linked to corruption at the centre: ‘those who perpetuate corruption would find it very difficult to accept that [decentralisation of resource management] kind of arrangement’ (Donor Agency, male). The misuse of resources, however, is not only limited to central control; the mismanagement of funds has been reported at the district level (see donor agency interview quotation above).

Decentralisation ambitions in Malawi have met with resistance. National level politics and the importance of the President retaining political control trumped efforts to support devolution and democratic decentralisation at the district level. While more senior Ministry of Education officials at the national level may be keen to shift the administrative burden (e.g. of teacher payroll) down to districts, mid-level central government bureaucrats are apprehensive about losing their position and control.

For decentralisation to work, argue Ministry officials, communities should implement activities and allocate resources in line with the centrally set policy agenda and priorities. Whether communities have the capacity to do so and whether or not local level priorities are in line with a centrally set policy framework remains a question. Politicians who disregard the need for strong accountability mechanisms, look to centralise and consolidate power and their behaviour is reflected and repeated at the community level: “the political super-structure will cast a shadow even at the grassroots and that inspires people into a direction” (Civil society representative, male).

The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) is being implemented in spite of this resistance. Understanding the interrelationship between mainly political resistance to devolved authority and the effectiveness or not of an education-specific decentralisation effort will be an important theme to develop through the remainder of this thesis. Through its financial support to the PSIP, the donor community is responsible for enabling the PSIP to be implemented.

4.3.3. Donor influence

Since the 1994 elections, many international donors have funded decentralisation efforts both in support of broad democratic devolution reform as well as by sector, including in education (see Chapter 3). As noted in section 4.2.2, the donors sampled in this study were all involved in support for the PSIP and therefore had a degree of common interest in its success. It is important to note, however, that the priorities and motives of individual donors shift over time and across context (see Chapter 3, Section 3.3.3 for further discussion).

The findings here suggest a complex inter-relationship between government, donors and citizens and their influence, particularly in the context of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP). The nature and scope for influence appears to vary with individual personalities rather than specific institutions. Depending on the relations between Ministry of Education Directors and donor representatives in Malawi, donors can influence “a lot”, according to one Ministry of Education official (Civil society representative, Malawian, male).

There is a perception of strong donor support for overall decentralisation but according to one senior government official, this perception is misconstrued.

We're in National Decentralisation Policy (NDP) II, it expires in 2013, we are supposed to have another one that starts in 2014 [...] people have said it is a German arrangement, especially NDP II. Do you know why? All the partners pulled out because of the [stalled elections] [...] except UNDP and GIZ³⁹. GIZ were supporting preparation of the second phase together with UNDP. So, people thought this was a donor driven arrangement which is not the case.... The thinking is government, the resources are coming from the partners to drive the process. (Central Government official, male)

While donors' financial support to decentralisation is evident, it is less easy to attribute particular policies or thinking to either donor or government. However, the findings do

³⁹ GIZ is a German development agency; UNDP is the United Nations Development Programme.

suggest that perceived donor influence on decentralisation could be used by the political elite to resist and delay progress.

Politicians who said, “no this is an agenda of development partners” because they didn’t like decentralisation. They said decentralisation was disempowering to them [...] to central government. So, they thought, it’s the development partners who want central government to be weak. (Central Government official, male)

In discussions with one of the main donors supporting decentralisation, it was clear that there were significant challenges associated with the implementation of NDP II. Building on NDP I, the new policy was intended to drive progress on decentralisation but since 2009 when it was endorsed, no taskforce has been set up and little progress made. Donors have supported the preparation of nine sets of guidelines to support the implementation, including a guidebook on the local government system, a code of conduct for local councillors and a pre-election civic education guide. At the time of the interview, not one of these had been published. Furthermore, there were signs that the Ministry of Local Government and the Office of the President and Cabinet were not cooperating with one another.

At a recent conference for District Commissioners, the political incentive was the opportunity to speak with the Traditional Authorities⁴⁰ who had turned up to the event rather than to make any systematic progress on decentralisation. Clearly frustrated by the slow progress with the broader decentralisation effort in Malawi, donors have started to withdraw their support.

In contrast, donors in the education sector are quick to claim influence and to use decentralised channels as a means to make faster progress and to avoid blockages in central government systems.⁴¹ For example, the decision to use the Local Development Fund (LDF) to finance classroom construction given the slow progress of the central Ministry-led construction appears to have been the result of a series of donor-government

⁴⁰ *Ex officio* members of district councils

⁴¹ As discussed in Chapter 3, section 3.3.3, the main donors involved in the education decentralisation effort at the time comprised DFID, the German Development Cooperation, JICA, UNICEF, USAID, and the World Bank.

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conversations. The donors were keen to use their money to accelerate classroom construction.

As long as you are putting in more money, then you have a say and you can influence what the Ministry can do. (Donor Agency, female)

We're [government] ready to do that, if you [the donors] have the money. (Donor Agency, male)

As discussed in Chapter 3, donors were instrumental in the design and financing of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) and also claim influence on the decision to allow schools to open bank accounts for the PSIP.

We from [donor] side were trying to push Ministry to open school bank accounts then the answer from the Ministry was: "No, no this is against the law of Malawi, the school cannot have a bank account. Who is accountable in the school?" And I remember, I said this is rubbish, I don't take that, of course it is possible to open a bank account and you assign two people to be accountable. (Donor Agency, male)

The implication of donor influence here is that the government may have been slower without the donor pressure or may not have pursued this school financing mechanism at all. This is confirmed by an NGO respondent who suggests that "donors have sometimes stepped in to jump start the process" (Civil society representative, male).

The findings suggest that decentralisation is an area where both donor and citizen demands are broadly aligned. One respondent suggested that in the context of education, political will was weak but pressure from donors and local communities has ensured that decentralisation reform pushes through.

I think in the Malawi setting, it is the communities demanding what they want to take part in from the duty bearers, plus efforts of the [donors]. In terms of political will, I think it's very small. But if you look what the donors would want to see happening, and what the communities would want to be doing in taking part in the management of the institutions,

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[...] The communities would want decentralisation. The donors have emphasised on decentralisation but unwillingly the political arm now has given in to decentralisation. (District Government official, male)

One respondent suggested that government is often more likely to respond to donor rather than citizen pressure (Civil society representative, male). While frustrated by the slow progress on devolution to districts councils, donors have been happy to bypass this resistance and push forward initiatives that direct central government resources down to the community level through both the Primary School Improvement Programme and the Local Development Fund. While this may suit donors' desire to achieve sector-specific impact and results (for example with classroom construction) it may also contribute to maintaining the status quo and the ongoing centralisation of political power by glossing over the local governance challenges.

The findings confirm that national politics can use donor influence as a means to resist further decentralisation as something pushed by outsiders. When donors put pressure on the government to hold the local council elections after the delays in 2005, President Bingu Mutharika asked the "foreigners" to keep away from forcing Malawi to conduct local government elections (People Daily, 2006⁴²). Instead, donors were urged to leave Malawians to decide whether the polls were important to the country or not. Donors may inadvertently be maintaining the status quo in an effort to challenge it.

⁴² Accessed on 25 May 2014 at http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/200604/08/eng20060408_256864.html

4.4. DISCUSSION

To bring together the themes of rationale, resistance and donor influence and suggest how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi, this section discusses the findings presented above in the broader context of the decentralisation literature (Chapter 2) and Malawi's political economy (Chapter 3).

Notwithstanding its historical roots and as part of a broader Africa-wide trend in the 1990s, the findings suggest that the motivations for Malawi's current decentralisation effort stem from the democratic transition in 1994 and include efforts to improve public services (Rondinelli et al. 1983; Rodriguez-Pose and Sandall 2008). The findings confirm a clearly defined rationale for decentralisation, split into two themes: local, democratic participation on the one hand, and improving government service delivery on the other. The effort is firmly embedded within the 'good governance' discourse (Rondinelli et al. 1983; Romeo 2003; World Bank 2003; Grindle 2004; UNESCO 2008).

Reflecting back to the accountability framework presented in Chapter 2, Figure 2 (World Bank 2003), the decentralisation effort in Malawi intended to impact both on improved short route accountability through more responsive, efficient and accountable service provision at the school level (for example through the Primary School Improvement Programme) as well as on long route accountability by improving citizens' participation in local democracy (though democratic devolution).

Ostensibly, political elites promoted and developed the ideals of democratic devolution in the years immediately leading up to and following the 1994 elections. Linked to President Muluzi's slogan ("power to the people") and, in part, to nurture a young democracy, it served a useful political purpose; but by 2005, political incentives had changed. The demands of multiparty politics meant that President Bingu Mutharika (elected in 2004) risked losing political control if local council elections went ahead in 2005. With the slow pace of change and local council elections stalled, devolution of power and deep democratic devolution remains an aspiration. Malawi's decentralisation in practice can now be understood as deconcentration rather than devolution (see Chapter 2 for further discussion, including reference to Rondinelli et al. 1983; Bray 1999; McGinn and Welsh 1999).

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Deconcentration does not devolve power and decision-making authority to lower levels; rules may be implemented at a subnational level, but they are made at the centre. While it may open up the space for improvements in the delivery of education services, it does very little, if anything, for local democracy. Whether or not this reality has an impact on the effectiveness of education decentralisation and the Primary School Improvement Programme in particular, remains to be explored in the remaining two empirical chapters. There is, however, some evidence from Ethiopia that decentralisation can lead to significant gains in the quality of basic services (including education) despite strong central administrative control and a highly centralised political system (Khan et al. 2014).

Clarity of accountability structures and organisational design are key issues within a principal-agent framework; see Besley and Ghatak (2003) cited in Chapter 2, section 2.2.4. If the structures do not work as intended (as in Malawi) it is perhaps likely that this will affect organisational design and the eventual outcomes that can be expected from the reform. A lack of clarity around actual lines of accountability and design within a system is also likely to contribute to a breakdown in what Pritchett describes as ‘coherence’ and ‘alignment’ within education systems (Pritchett 2015).

Linked to the rationale for Malawi’s decentralisation effort, four further design considerations should be noted. First, the main target for Malawi’s broader decentralisation reform is the district level where resources (financial and human) have been allocated albeit these arguably remain insufficient in both number and seniority. The main target for the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), however, is the school with districts sometimes unsure of their role and central government not providing sufficient guidance and support to encourage effective implementation. Second, while central government officials in the Ministry of Education are supportive of the decentralisation effort through the PSIP, they maintain a belief that the locus of control remains with the central Ministry. Policies and priorities are set by the central government, it will be schools’ responsibility to allocate school grants and make decisions on school improvement in line with these central positions (another clear indication of deconcentration rather than devolution).

Third, while the intention was to remove the challenge of dual administration whereby District officials are accountable both to District Commissioners and to central government authorities, the stalled local council elections and therefore lack of political

authority at the district level have meant that dual administration remains a reality. This further strengthens central control at the expense of districts. Fourth and perhaps most importantly in the context of understanding the nature of decentralisation and its effects, are the challenges around implementation. Implementation and practice is shaped by the political economy and the multiple influences at play. The greater understanding that researchers can have about the political economy context, the greater the chance of understanding the circumstances and underlying reasons that explain the observed outcomes of any new policy or programme.

The disconnect between policy and practice, noted in section 4.1 is not unusual and builds on the discussion on implementation in Chapter 3 (section 3.4.1). As Hanson notes:

Decentralisation clearly does not come with the passing of laws or the signing of decrees. Like most types of reform, it is built rather than created. (Hanson 1998:121)

In Fullan's words, 'to restructure is not to reculture...changing formal structures is not the same as changing norms, habits, skills and beliefs' (Fullan 1993:49).

While democratic devolution met resistance, attempts to improve service delivery through decentralisation in the education sector forged ahead (with significant donor support). Section 4.1 discussed the extent of devolved functions in the primary education sub-sector and highlighted the restricted control over discretionary resources at the district level. In contrast, schools and their communities do have control over the limited resources channelled into school bank accounts as part of the PSIP. In this regard, I consider the PSIP a form of 'school-based management' within the broader framework of deconcentration.

Using Leithwood and Menzies categorisation of school-based management according to the source of control, the PSIP aims at balanced control shared by parents, community members and teachers (Leithwood and Menzies 1998). There are, however, no clear accountability measures in place in terms of incentivising a focus on improved student achievement (see Wossmann 2007; Fuchs and Wossmann 2007) and, as discussed above, the role of the district in terms of oversight and support to schools is uncertain.

While the political incentives for decentralisation in Malawi have changed over time, donor backing of decentralisation has remained constant, albeit shifting its focus in

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response to these changes and between donors. As Structural Adjustment Programmes were abandoned, and poverty reduction, growth development strategies and the delivery of the Millennium Development Goals were prioritised in the late 1990s and early 2000s, decentralisation was seen as an essential policy option to mutually reinforce good governance and service delivery. In recent years, support for improved service delivery has increased as donors have become frustrated with the stalled efforts to establish district councils as intended.

However, as the findings suggest, donor support for decentralisation has not always been welcome, particularly with the political elite. It is at this point that the findings and literature suggest an interesting paradox.

Many international donors have pushed for democratic devolution against the will of Malawi's political elite. Emerging from two generations of autocratic rule, the findings suggest that Malawi's citizens appear keen to participate in the improvement of their local schools and in decisions that affect their lives. The fact that collective action and political activism is weak in Malawi as a result of the hierarchy and power imbalances in Malawian society (Cammack 2001) may, however, limit the scope for genuine participation.

One could argue that donors and citizens are aligned in their endeavour to lift citizens' voice, however, Malawi's political elite use donor interference as a means to dampen efforts towards democratic devolution: "decentralisation" is a donor agenda and not a government agenda is a populist argument made by government. The findings do indeed suggest an interesting relationship between government technocrats, the political elite, donors, and citizens. There is some perceived alignment between donors and citizens while at the same time a possible tension between government technocrats wanting to use decentralisation to improve the delivery of education services and the political elite sceptical of any decentralisation effort.

In providing an overview of Malawi's political and economic history since 1964, Chapter 3 highlighted centralisation and clientelism as characteristics of the post-independence Malawian state. A closer look at power and patronage may shed more light on why democratic devolution as envisaged in Malawi within the "good governance" paradigm has not been implemented as intended by the donors who have supported it. Furthermore, the findings suggest that it makes more sense to understand education decentralisation in

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Malawi as a technical endeavour to improve service delivery rather than as part of a broader political effort; school-based management reform, not democratic devolution.

The hierarchy and power imbalances evident in Malawian society today are the product of the colonial experience and part of the socio-cultural response to neopatrimonialism (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.6 for further discussion on neopatrimonialism and its roots). Cammack suggests that societies like Malawi's are characterised by a "large power distance" in which "subordinates envision being told what to do, and privileges and status are expected and popular for the elite" (Cammack 2001:47).

Malawi's history of autocratic rule under Banda and enduring patrimonial system offers an explanation of why people are afraid to take action in the absence of authority from above. Instead, people wait to be told what to do.

Hierarchy and excessive deference, and a lack of volunteerism, initiative-taking, and questioning of the elite are all manifest as weaknesses of civil society and social capital. (Cammack 2001:48)

The resistance to decentralisation is therefore twofold, both top down from central government elites not wanting to let go of the power they need to maintain their status and bottom up from a citizenry used to accessing services through informal networks and conditioned into subordination. There is an administrative logic to decentralisation resistance too (in terms of the Ministry of Education looking to maintain or regain control); however, the findings suggest that Ministry of Education officials have been supportive of education decentralisation in Malawi.

What Van de Walle describes as partial reform syndrome may explain why Malawi embarked on broad decentralisation reform and why its progress has been uneven (Van de Walle 2001). He argues that the general pattern has been that, after an initial period of maintaining the status quo, deepening economic crisis forced African executives to accept that some reform was unavoidable. The democratic transition marked this point for Malawi. Van de Walle suggests that there have been signs of progress in areas such as economic stabilisation and some forms of liberalisation but less in terms of institutional reform thanks to what he describes as a 'patrimonial logic' (Van de Walle 2001). Malawi's decentralisation policies were certainly reformist in design but were then not

implemented because doing so would reduce the discretion over state resources which the elite need to maintain their power.

Dependent on international support during its democratic transition (Harrigan 2001), many of Malawi's donors built on their influence to support decentralisation efforts. Cammack's critique is that donors do not have an understanding of an alternative patrimonial logic that explains patterns of behaviour which are rooted outside the rational, democratic, Weberian state (Cammack et al. 2007). The donor delusion, as well as the financial support donors provide, helps maintain the hybrid state – ostensibly Weberian which in practice functions along informal, clientelistic lines.

Indeed, the findings do suggest that donors may well not be suited to engage with such an alternative logic. As the findings suggest in section 4.3.3, a certain donor frustrated with its support for democratic devolution reform is signalling it may opt out. As it does so, the donor community at large continues to provide substantial support to decentralisation efforts in service delivery, including school-based management reform.

There appears to be little recognition of how the two efforts are linked despite a growing recognition from donors that politics matters and that donors need to understand the political aspects of reform even if they are not able fully to engage in this area (Unsworth 2010; Leftwich and Wheeler 2011). A focus on school-based management reform, for example in support of the Primary School Improvement Programme, enables donors to avoid the more contentious terrain of democratic devolution. The result may well be the appearance of an alignment with citizens demanding a greater say in decisions and control over resources, but the cost could be that donors unwittingly sustain the neopatrimonial status quo by not confronting the central power dynamic and by sustaining delivery of core public services (and thus legitimising the regime).

4.5. CONCLUSION

Through a policy review and the analysis of key informant interviews, this chapter has explored the nature of (education) decentralisation in Malawi. It suggests that for education decentralisation in Malawi to be understood, one needs first to understand the broader context and rationale for decentralisation in Malawi since the democratic transition in 1994.

As such, education decentralisation as observed today, is the product of Malawi's decentralisation effort since 1994. This set out both to devolve powers to elected local councils (democratic devolution) and to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. The intent was devolution, the result is deconcentration. Political authority and related decision-making remains centralised. Decentralisation in the education sector is a manifestation of this deconcentration whereby district councils have been delegated some but not all authority for primary education.

Central government and donor officials cited the need to stimulate local participation and the improved responsiveness of local government as the main rationale for decentralisation. District education and civil society actors, on the other hand, were more concerned with enhancing accountability and increasing the efficiency of service delivery given perceptions of weak central government capability and limited accountability structures.

The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) is a form of school-based management within this broader framework of deconcentration and partial delegation of authority to District Education Offices. Whereas most research exploring decentralisation in education focuses on the education sector alone, the findings in this chapter reveal the broader context within which school-based management reform is being pursued. The next two empirical chapters will reveal the extent to which stalled democratic devolution in Malawi may or may not affect education decentralisation and education quality. The findings may indeed suggest that in a context like Malawi, starting out with a narrower focus on deconcentration before building consensus and political momentum towards devolution, may be a more appropriate approach.

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While the PSIP targets the school as the main locus of power for school improvement, there is some tension within the Malawian education system as to where power should lie. Not surprisingly, central government officials stated their authority to set the national policy agenda and suggested a mistrust of local government and schools in their ability to implement in line with centrally set priorities.

While districts were to be the locus of political control through democratic devolution, district officials are now unsure of their role within the context of school-based management reform, leading to poor coordination and the potential mismanagement of resources destined for schools. Civil society actors point to the absence of political will as the main driver behind the resistance to decentralisation and cite weak accountability structures as a significant challenge. How schools respond within this political economy is explored in Chapter 6 and has important implications for the design of effective school-based management reform policies.

The decentralisation experience in Malawi since 1994 re-affirms the challenge of effective implementation: to restructure is not to 'reculture' (Fullan 1993:49). Political (and Presidential, in particular) resistance are at the root of these implementation challenges in Malawi. Civil society actors state clearly the negative impact of national politicians' disregard for accountability on the behaviours of community leaders and bureaucrats at the local level.

The transition to multiparty democracy in 1994 involved pressure from both citizens and donors for increased decentralisation. Parliament passed the Local Government Act in 1998 and implementation of its accompanying National Decentralisation Policy began. Democratic devolution ground to a halt in 2005 with the delay in local council elections but with significant financial support from a range of international donors, aspects of education decentralisation forged ahead.

In the education sector, the findings suggest an appearance of alignment between donors and citizens, as donor funds are channelled through government systems into school bank accounts, facilitating more local control over resources and decision-making at the school level – school-based management reform. At the same time, ignoring the challenges of the broader decentralisation process may risk undermining it. Donors' incentives and priorities vary across international donor agencies and over time but are broadly focused on achieving visible results whilst avoiding the pitfalls and frustrations of complex

national politics. Support to school-based management reform through the PSIP was seen by donor representatives as a means to “fast-track” education decentralisation down to the school level, bypassing stalled democratic devolution and the complexities of national politics.

Yet it is these very complexities, the nature of Malawi’s state, its history and current political economy that provide some explanation for the erosion of community participation and collective action at a local level; these are the very design features of school-based management reform which are intended to make it a success, driving improvements in education quality. This understanding of Malawi’s (education) decentralisation experience, its tensions and, at times, contradictions, will facilitate a deeper understanding as I explore the effects of the Primary School Improvement Programme (Chapter 5) and the impact of this political and policy context on schools and their communities (Chapter 6).

5. ANALYSING THE EFFECT OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) is central to Malawi's objective to "fast-track" decentralisation in the education sector (Chapter 4) but does it work? In this chapter, I undertake a quantitative analysis to estimate the effect of the PSIP on education quality. In this regard, I consider the PSIP to be a proxy indicator of education decentralisation and define four indicators of education quality.

The empirical literature on the relationship between decentralisation and education quality is mixed (Chapter 2). While there is some evidence that devolving decision-making to schools contributes to small but positive effects on dropout and repetition, these estimates appear to be driven mainly by results from middle-income countries (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.7). Overall, results suggest that school-based decision-making and school grant reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel (Blimpo and Evans 2011; Beasley and Huillery 2016).

The multidimensional nature of education quality tends not to be considered in the quantitative programme evaluation literature on education (Chapter 2). Instead, input, output or outcome indicators are used; these are sometimes categorised as 'proximal' (enrolment, repetition, dropout) and 'final' (test scores or measures of non-cognitive skills) (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). In this chapter, I use one final outcome (exam results), two proximal outputs and one proximal input as indicators of education quality. These are pupils who pass their Primary School Leaving Certificate, pupils who drop out from school, pupils who repeat a class and the number of female pupils per pit latrine.

An important implementation feature of the PSIP makes it suited for rigorous evaluation. The PSIP was rolled out to different districts on a phased schedule over four years. This allows me to use the districts that received the programme later as a comparison group, exploiting variation in programme receipt over time and across districts.

Using school administrative data over an eight-year period from 2007/8 to 2014/15, I use quasi-experimental methods to estimate the effect of PSIP on indicators of education quality. I consider schools that entered the programme in its second year (phase 2) to be

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treatment schools with schools due to enter PSIP in the fourth year (phase 4) as the comparison group.

The panel structure of the dataset and the extent of both the pre-treatment and post-treatment periods, allow me to use difference-in-difference estimation to assess credible estimates of the effect of the PSIP on education quality. I can also examine the validity of the two core assumptions of difference-in-difference estimation: first, whether or not there are common trends over time in the pre-treatment period and second, whether distribution of the treatment (i.e., participation in the PSIP) depends on observed and unobserved permanent individual school characteristics.

The results suggest that the PSIP is associated with a reduction in school dropout, an increase in the provision of latrines for female pupils, and an improvement in the proportion of pupils passing the Primary School Leaving Certificate Exam (henceforth, ‘Primary Leaving Exam’). Across all schools, the PSIP is associated with a 1.1 percentage point reduction in school dropout rate; this equates to a 20 per cent reduction in the proportion of pupils dropping out of school. There is also an observed effect of the PSIP on the number of female pupils per pit latrine for “very large schools”; on average, there are approximately 55 fewer female pupils per pit latrine in “very large schools”.

For “very large schools” (which receive an additional per capita grant allocation), the PSIP is associated with a 8 percentage point increase in exam pass rate. This improvement implies a 14 per cent increase in the proportion of pupils passing the Primary Leaving Exam in “very large schools”. There is no observed effect of the PSIP on repetition rates. The credibility of these estimates is tested, and evidence presented to suggest I can have some confidence in the results.

This chapter starts with a presentation of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), including a discussion of the factors that determined the selection of districts into each phase of the roll out (building on Chapter 3, section 3.3.4). The data source, indicators of education quality and issues around data quality are discussed in the next section. I present the analytical strategy in section three, including identification and potential threats to this. Results of the difference-in-difference estimation follow in section four. A section on robustness checks explores potential confounding factors in greater detail before the chapter concludes with a discussion, including how the findings relate to research sub-question two (Chapter 1).

5.1. PRIMARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) set out to enhance education decentralisation in Malawi, with a core objective of improving the quality of education. This section first considers its core design features before looking at how it has been implemented to date.

5.1.1. Programme design

To evaluate the effect of the PSIP on indicators of education quality, it is important to be clear about what the PSIP constitutes. The “treatment” effect of PSIP comprises three core elements. First, school improvement grants (henceforth ‘school grants’) to public primary schools that allow schools and their communities to carry out small-scale improvement activities, from buying teaching and learning materials to hiring auxiliary teachers. Second, improvement grants to zones and districts to facilitate enhanced monitoring, support and oversight of schools. Third, training on school improvement planning, financial management and community participation is provided to schools and communities through national and district-level training structures.

The sequence of activities is important to note. The training is provided in the year before the first school grants are disbursed. Upon completion of the training, schools and their communities are expected to develop a school improvement plan and budget in consultation with the local community. The plans and budgets must first be approved by the District Education Office before grants are disbursed into schools’ bank accounts. Districts and zones are then expected to use their additional grants for support and monitoring of school improvement plan implementation and grant use. While the training is only planned for the first two years of schools’ participation in PSIP, the development of school improvement plans and budgets are expected to take place annually and are a condition of accessing the school grants (Government of Malawi 2010b).

Suffice to say that the PSIP is a package of interventions that targets communities, schools, zones and districts. The analysis in this chapter will consider the PSIP “treatment” as a whole and will not be able to disentangle the effects of its constituent

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parts. A detailed discussion of the PSIP, including how it relates to broader decentralisation processes in Malawi was discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

The Ministry of Education planned to phase in PSIP over a four-year period, starting in school year 2010/11 and reaching national coverage in 2013/14. Figure 5 summarises the roll-out across schools and districts.

Figure 5 Roll out of the Primary School Improvement Programme

School year	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
	Phase 1 6 districts 1,004 schools	Phase 2 +6 districts +1,100 schools	Phase 3 +12 districts +1,462 schools	Phase 4 10 districts +1,389 schools	
Base school grant (MK)	250,000	300,000	350,000	600,000	600,000
“Very large school” threshold	2,000	2,000	2,000	1,000	1,000
Extra MK per enrolled child over threshold	100	100	120	300	300
EMIS⁴³ year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015

Source: Government of Malawi (2010b) and administrative data from EMIS.

Schools are allocated fixed block grants, starting with MK250,000 per school in 2010/11, rising to MK600,000 in 2013/14.⁴⁴ Schools categorised as “very large” are allocated additional per capita increments over and above the fixed block grant. For the first three years, “very large schools” were those with enrolments equal to or bigger than 2,000

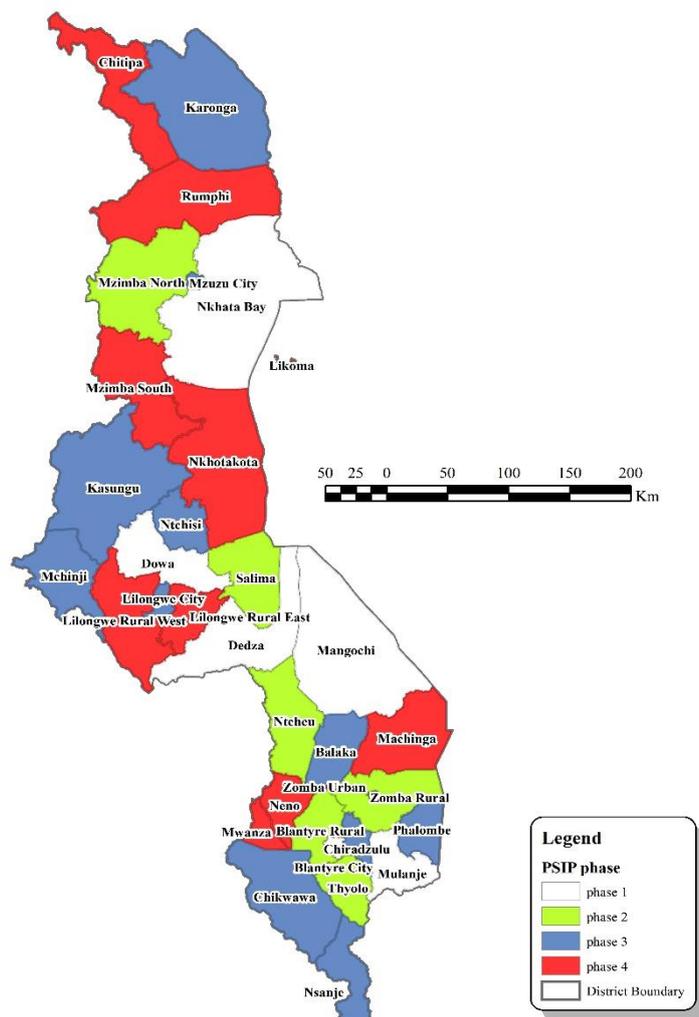
⁴³ Education Management Information System (EMIS)

⁴⁴ The Malawi Kwacha (MK) devalued significantly in 2012/3. The current exchange rate is approximately £1 = MK850. When PSIP was being planned, the exchange rate was approximately £1 = MK280. School grants of MK300,000 would have been the equivalent of approximately £1,000 rather than £350 in today’s prices.

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pupils; in 2013/14 the “very large school” threshold was reduced to 1,000 pupils. For schools over the threshold in the first two years, MK100 was allocated for each additional pupil over the threshold. In 2012/13 this per capita amount rose to MK120 and in 2013/14 to MK300. At a threshold of 2,000 enrolled pupils, “very large schools” represent between 3 and 4 per cent of a total of just under 5,000 public primary schools in Malawi; at 1,000 enrolled pupils, this rises to 31 per cent.

Figure 6 Map of Malawi: phased roll out of the PSIP across districts



Source: Government of Malawi (2010b)

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The PSIP built on recent donor-funded initiatives to strengthen decentralisation, including the channelling of resources to schools (Chapter 3). The national Direct Support to Schools programme (DSS) had run since 2006 but with lower levels of funding to schools (approximately MK45,000 per school), limited discretion at the school level, no grants to zones and districts for oversight and support and with no training package.

As PSIP scaled-up across the country, the DSS programme was phased out. Therefore, in phase 2 of the PSIP roll-out, 2,104 schools in 12 districts would receive the school grants through the PSIP while the 2,853 schools in the remaining 22 districts would continue to receive DSS. Figure 6 shows a map of Malawi with each district coloured according to its roll out phase in the PSIP.

One year before the Government of Malawi's roll out of the PSIP (in school year 2009/10), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided resources to pilot school improvement grants in six districts, one in each region of the country (Chapter 3, section 3.3.4). The USAID programme provided technical assistance and resources to support the development, implementation and monitoring of school improvement plans together with school grants in 221 schools across the six districts (20 per cent of the schools in those districts). This programme served as a pilot for the national PSIP roll out.

In addition to regional representation, USAID and Ministry of Education officials selected the six districts based on poor performance across a range of educational, social and contextual factors (Ginsburg et al. 2014). Five primary education indicators and a number of poverty and vulnerability measures were used, including gender parity, net enrolment rate, pupil-teacher ratio (qualified and unqualified teachers), repetition and drop-out. Poverty measures included the number of people living below the poverty line, literacy rates and the number of orphans and vulnerable children living the district (Ginsburg et al. 2014). In addition, a qualitative assessment of contextual factors was considered, including the socio-economic context, school infrastructure and perceived district capacity.

While there is no record of the quantitative analysis done, it is clear that the six districts were purposefully selected based on a combination of regional representation, and proxies for educational and social need. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education subsequently decided that these same six districts would form the first phase of the PSIP roll-out in the

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2010/11 school year. Phase 1 schools were therefore selected based on a set of needs-based criteria as well as having significant support from a USAID-funded programme both in the year before roll-out as well as during the first year of the PSIP.

Understanding the selection of the six districts into this USAID-funded programme and subsequent selection into phase 1 of the PSIP has important implications for the analytical strategy adopted in this chapter. The purposive selection of phase 1 districts is likely to bias estimated effects given both district characteristics and the additional support provided to these districts prior to the roll-out. The plan to phase in the remaining 28 districts over the following three-year period, was based on ensuring equal geographical representation across the regions.

As noted above, the year before a district receives the school grants, the plan envisaged that the district would undergo a capacity building programme. This would provide training to district, zone, and school staff as well as community members. The training would cover the roles and responsibilities of School Management Committees and Parent Teacher Associations, the development and implementation of school improvement plans as well as financial management and school improvement grant modalities. A package of training materials and guidelines were prepared for this purpose (Government of Malawi 2010b). In this regard, the overall PSIP intervention in phase 1 starts with training in school year 2009/10 with grants following in 2010/11.

5.1.2. Programme implementation

The difference between policy intent and implementation can be stark, and particularly in the context of decentralisation reform (Lipsky 1980; Fixsen et al. 2005; Faguet and Shami 2008). Understanding the fidelity of implementation to the original plan is important both to inform the analytical strategy and to help us understand how to interpret the results. See Chapter 3 (section 3.4.1) and Chapter 4 (section 4.1) for further discussion on understanding implementation.

The Ministry of Education undertook its own research of the PSIP in 2013, covering the first three years of the roll out (Government of Malawi 2013b). Its findings provide some evidence on the extent to which the PSIP was implemented as intended. Questionnaires were sent out to one school in each of the 424 zones across the country with data collected

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on school improvement grant disbursements and use, the functionality of school-community structures (School Management Committees and Parent Teachers' Associations) and on the school's participation in PSIP training activities. Table 5 summarises information on the proportion of schools (across the first three phases) that received their school grant as planned, the average amount of the school grant received by the school and the proportion of schools with school improvement plans.⁴⁵

Table 5 shows that not all schools received their grants as intended. Seventy-six per cent of the schools across the six phase 1 districts received their school grants, at an average of MK231,790 per school - below the planned MK250,000 (see Figure 5). For the first year of phase 2, only 68 per cent of schools received their SIGs at an average of MK319,367 per school. The report highlights reasons for the discrepancies, including schools that were ineligible to receive the school grant because they had not yet opened a school bank account and/or had not had their school improvement plan approved (Government of Malawi 2013b).

Table 5 Intent vs reality: data on school grants received and plans developed

	2010/11			2011/12			2012/13		
	% of schools received SIG	Average SIG amount (MK)	% of schools with SIP	% of schools received SIG	Average SIG amount (MK)	% of schools with SIP	% of schools received SIG	Average SIG amount (MK)	% of schools with SIP
Phase 1 districts	76%	231,790	84%	84%	308,230	92%	89%	400,199	95%
Phase 2 districts	-	-	24%	68%	319,367	74%	80%	402,739	93%
Phase 3 districts	-	-	14%	-	-	23%	76%	403,321	83%
Phase 4 districts	-	-	12%	-	-	23%	-	-	59%

Source: adapted from PSIP National Evaluation Report, Government of Malawi (2013b)

Inconsistencies between programme intent and implementation also arose due to delays in central government's release of funds to districts within the school year and districts

⁴⁵ Within the Primary School Improvement Programme, school grants are referred to as School Improvement Grants (SIGs) while SIP refers to School Improvement Plan.

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own understanding and capacity to implement PSIP and release funds into the school bank accounts (see, for example, Ravishankar et al. 2016:14).

In the district of Salima (phase 2), for example, only 18 per cent of the school grant resources reached the schools in 2011/12 (see Appendix 9.10 for a breakdown across all the districts within each phase). Research by the USAID-funded project in 2012 (and corroborated by the findings discussed in Chapter 4) attributed this to a breakdown in communication between central government and the district which led to Salima District allocating the majority of its school grant resources to school construction (USAID 2012).

In contrast to the variation in actual school grant disbursements, the availability of school improvement plans (SIPs) within schools increased dramatically when schools came on board within the PSIP. For example, 24 per cent of phase 2 schools had available school improvement plans in 2010/11, rising to 74 per cent of phase 2 schools with improvement plans in their first full year of PSIP implementation (2011/12). The trends in school improvement plan availability indicate a degree of implementation fidelity with regard to the roll out of training on school improvement plans. Further discussion on the details of PSIP implementation are discussed in the context of the qualitative case study findings presented in the next chapter.

5.2. DATA

The analysis in this chapter is based on school administrative data on 4,958 public primary schools across an eight-year period (2008 to 2015). The data are collected annually as part of the Ministry's Education Management Information System (EMIS). Questionnaires sent out to all schools (public and private) are completed by the primary school head teachers and validated by zone and district education officials.⁴⁶ Data provided by each head teacher pertain to school-level information as of March each year. 2011 EMIS data therefore relate to the school year 2010/11, 2012 to the school year 2011/12, and so on. The unit of observation for this study is a given school in a given year and because only government-run primary schools are eligible for participation in the PSIP, private schools are not included in the analysis.

5.2.1. Indicators of education quality

Education quality can be defined in different ways (Chapter 2). This chapter takes a 'quantitative' perspective and uses a range of indicators to proxy for the concept of quality. Much of the recent empirical literature on 'what works' to improve education quality uses standardised test score data as the learning outcome of interest (see Evans and Popova 2016; Muralidharan 2017). Although EMIS does not contain standardised test score data, the indicators proposed here are important as they are correlated with long-term problems in terms of academic achievement and are reported to be meaningful indicators of education quality (Jimerson 2001; Berlinski et al. 2008; Manacorda 2012).

Research suggests that for many people, national school exam results are the most important indicators of education quality (Serpell 1999; Sifuna and Sawamura 2010). Other studies use indicators of observable inputs such as buildings and the availability of teaching materials as indicators of good schools (Mbiti 2016) – see Chapter 2, section 2.1.1. Here, I use the pass rate in the national exam at the end of the primary cycle, the Primary School Leaving Certificate (PSLC), dropout and repetition rates and a measure of the number of female pupils per latrine in each school.

⁴⁶ Validation involves district officials comparing the data on the completed questionnaires with schools' monthly data returns and through district officials' knowledge of the schools under their jurisdiction.

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Repeating students tend to fall further behind their peers in later years, which in turn, increases the risk of early school dropout (see Jimerson 2001; Berlinski et al. 2008; Manacorda 2012). I use female pupils per latrine in order to explore the extent to which the PSIP contributed to targeted equity-enhancing investments as well as to include a measure of school infrastructure that is more likely to be sensitive to school grant inputs.⁴⁷

Specifically, I define the Primary Leaving Exam pass rate in school year t as the number of students who passed the PSLC over the total number of students who sat the exam. It is important to note that not all schools include Standard 8, the exam class, and therefore not all schools enter pupils for the PSLC (approximately 20 per cent of schools fall into this category). I compute the dropout rate in school year t as the number of students who did not complete the grade in school year $t - 1$ over the total enrolled in $t - 1$. The repetition rate is defined as the number of students repeating a grade at the beginning of school year t over the total enrolled in school year t .

Female pupils per latrine is defined as the ratio of female pupils for each latrine in the school each year. Given the resourcing implications, PSIP is likely to have a more immediate effect on infrastructure indicators such as this rather than end-of-cycle exams, repetition and dropout. Whilst the indicator aims to measure the change in availability of latrines rather than the increase or decrease in number of female pupils, it is more meaningful to set the ratio in terms of female pupils per latrine as it can communicate the level of accessibility or availability of latrines for female pupils.

With these indicators of education quality selected and defined, a question remains in terms of the extent that they are valid and reliable indicators of education quality. As noted in Chapter 2 (section 2.1.1), input (availability of latrines) and output/outcome indicators (exam results, repetition and dropout rates) may vary in both quality *and* quantity. These issues are discussed further in the concluding section of this chapter.

5.2.2. Data quality

School administrative data in developing countries are less reliable than desired (Gertler et al. 2012). There are concerns of possible misreporting in cases where these data are

⁴⁷ The literature on the importance of separate toilet facilities for girls as a means to improve female pupil enrolment and attendance is inconclusive, see, for example, Birdthistle et al. (2011).

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used to allocate resources or evaluate individual school performance and the reporting tends to be poorly monitored by district officials (Linden and Shastry 2012). Misreporting is less of a concern in Malawi where the incentives for doing have been limited, although the expectation of resources through PSIP poses risks. School grants are not allocated on a per capita basis except for “very large schools” (see section 5.1.1), and there is a risk of schools inflating their enrolments in order to qualify for additional per capita allocations. I later check the trends in the data for evidence of this (section 5.5).

A perennial challenge with the data, however, relates to concerns that head teachers and administrators may not put substantial effort into the accuracy of the completed questionnaires, suggesting room for measurement error. Ravishankar et al. (2016:xvii) report that ‘official data on enrolment, repeaters and dropouts are mutually inconsistent’ and suggest that pupils dropping out from school may be under-reported.

If inconsistent data is due to inattentiveness and inaccuracy rather than manipulation, statistical error is most likely to be random across observations; this is known as classical measurement error (Angrist and Pischke 2015). The main challenge with such error is that the estimates of impact will be biased towards zero. Where the estimated impacts are large, this is unlikely to be a problem but if minimal or no impact is detected and there is likelihood of a lot of measurement error, interpreting the results can be made more difficult. In response, a large sample size is one strategy to mitigate the risks associated with measurement error (Angrist and Pischke 2015).

Accounting for schools that do not enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam (approximately 20 per cent of schools per year), there are over 98 per cent of complete cases in all years for government school data. This may not pose a challenge to the internal validity of the estimates, but it does pose an external validity challenge if schools that do not enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam are systematically different from those that do. In section 5.5, I explore whether or not there are systematic differences between schools that enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam and schools that do not.

In summary, the reliability of EMIS data is questionable but unlikely to be systematically biased because of purposive manipulation of the data, except potentially for “very large schools” and this can be analysed. While missing data is a serious problem for private schools and for the background characteristics of teachers, it is less so in government schools, particularly those that enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam.

5.3. ANALYTICAL STRATEGY AND IDENTIFICATION

The objective of the analysis is to estimate the causal impact of the PSIP on measures of education quality, as outlined in section 5.2.1. In principle, I would like to compare school performance when schools are part of the PSIP to the counterfactual – that is, the quality of the same schools without PSIP at the same time. In reality, I can never observe these counterfactual outcomes. Instead, I use a group of comparison schools that did not receive the PSIP to construct our counterfactual.

The ideal experiment for identifying the PSIP effect on school quality would have been to randomly assign schools to treated and untreated groups. The PSIP effect could then have been estimated by comparing schools that received PSIP with their peers in the untreated or comparison group. As described in section 5.1.1, schools were not randomly assigned to participate in the PSIP but instead were purposefully selected as part of a phased roll out of the new policy over four years. Since the counterfactual is never observed and there is no randomised controlled trial, I need to turn to alternative methods that attempt to evaluate the effect of the PSIP under reasonable conditions.

In general, the literature has placed great emphasis on internal validity and study design, leading to a deep understanding of selection bias and the assumptions that allow identification of impacts (Imbens and Wooldridge 2009). For example, if there are systematic differences in characteristics between treated and untreated groups that lead to differences in outcomes, then differences in observed outcomes may simply reflect these characteristics and not the intervention itself. Study design assumptions are the Achilles heel of any particular method. Where their plausibility can be defended, causal inferences will be considered more credible.

Non-experimental evaluation methods are set apart by their identifying assumptions (Ravallion 2008; Imbens and Wooldridge 2009). A first category of methods assumes that, conditional on the observables, there are no unobserved factors that are associated with both exposure to the treatment and the potential outcomes. The literature refers to this assumption variously as unconfoundedness, conditional independence, exogeneity and selection on observables (Imbens and Wooldridge 2009). Methods that rest on this assumption include Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression and matching methods (Rosenbaum and Rubin 1984). The latter represents an improvement over the former by

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carefully selecting a comparison group that is as similar as possible to the treatment group in its observable characteristics (Reynolds and DesJardins 2009).

In this analysis, it would mean matching a set of schools receiving the PSIP with a set of “similar” schools that are not, with “similarity” based on average observed characteristics in the schools (e.g. school size, location, number of teachers). With the inclusion of only comparable schools in the analysis, matching methods require no extrapolation outside the region of common support – the region in which both treated and untreated schools with the same characteristics can be observed (Blundell et al. 2005; Angrist and Pischke 2015). An implication of restricting the sample to those found in the common support is that the treatment effect refers only to the selected subsample of the treated schools. If treatment effects are different across individual schools, the estimated treatment effect will not correspond to the parameter that the analysis was originally intended to estimate – that is, the mean treatment effect over the entire sample. A more fundamental challenge to this approach is that it relies on observable characteristics and assumes that unobservable characteristics do not confound the estimation (Rosenbaum and Rubin, 1985; Smith and Todd 2005a; Smith and Todd 2005b; Angrist and Pischke 2015).

The second category of quasi-experimental methods can more plausibly claim to account for unobservable characteristics or unconfoundedness. This set of methods includes instrumental variable estimation, regression discontinuity designs and difference-in-difference approaches.

Instrumental variables affect the outcome only through their influence on the treatment variable, and are at the same time uncorrelated with the unobservables (i.e. the error term in a regression model) (Angrist et al. 1996). The latter is called the exclusion restriction and is the key identifying assumption of instrumental variable estimation. Unfortunately, it is also untestable. Regression discontinuity designs take advantage of known eligibility rules – such as thresholds defined at a particular age or income – for participation in a programme (Thistlethwaite and Campbell 1960; Lee and Lemieux 2010). It mimics a randomised experiment by comparing the outcomes of treated and untreated individuals at or close to the eligibility threshold. For this study, no suitable instrumental variables

could be found and there is no consistent eligibility threshold for a school's inclusion into the PSIP which could facilitate a regression discontinuity design.⁴⁸

5.3.1. Difference-in-difference

A further strategy uses data with a time or cohort dimension to control for unobserved but fixed omitted variables. Here follows an explanation of the difference-in-difference methods I use, which follow established conventions within the literature, drawing heavily on Blundell and Costa Dias (2009), Gertler et al. (2012), and Angrist and Pischke (2015).

This method is usually implemented by comparing the difference in average behaviour before and after a policy reform for the treatment group with the before and after contrast for a comparison group. The approach can be a powerful tool in measuring the average effect of the treatment on the treated (Blundell and Costa Dias 2009). It does this by removing unobservable individual effects and common macro effects by relying on two important identifying assumptions: (i) common time effects across groups (also known as “parallel trends”) and (ii) no systematic composition changes within each group. I consider each of these in turn.

Although difference-in-differences allows us to control for the differences between the treatment and the comparison group that are constant over time, it will not help us eliminate the differences between the treatment and comparison groups that change over time. While the levels of the outcomes can be different between the treatment and comparison groups, in the absence of treatment, these outcomes need to increase or decrease at the same rate in both groups. If outcome trends are different for the two groups, then the estimated treatment effect would be biased. Relating to the second assumption and an additional time-varying factor, a further source of bias stems from the risk that individuals respond to the intervention by switching between the treatment and control groups.

In principle, many types of unobservable characteristics that may confound identification are those that vary across schools but are stable over time. This could include, for

⁴⁸ Using the “very large school” threshold could be used in a regression discontinuity design but would face a challenge given that the threshold changed between 2013/14 and 2014/15.

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example, the underlying socio-economic status of a community or district. By comparing changes, I can control for the observed and unobserved time-invariant school characteristics as well as time-varying factors common to both the treatment and comparison schools that might be correlated with the PSIP and the measures of education quality.

If the assumptions hold, the change in the comparison group is an estimate of the true counterfactual, that is, the change that would have happened in the treatment group if there were no intervention. Another way to state this is that the change in outcomes in the treatment group controls for fixed characteristics and the change in outcomes in the comparison group controls for time-varying factors that are common both to the comparison and treatment schools.

The panel structure of my data provides an opportunity for resolving or at least reducing the magnitude of unobserved variables that are correlated with the explanatory variable and the outcome of interest. As Hsiao (2003) argues, by utilising information on both the intertemporal dynamics and the individuality of the entities being investigated, one can control in a more natural way for the effects of missing or unobserved variables.

In this study, the PSIP treatment effect would therefore be identified from the average difference in the changes in education quality measures at two different points in time between two different groups of schools, treatment and comparison. The selection of an appropriate comparison group, which can be used to estimate what would have happened in the absence of the PSIP, is an essential part of the strategy.

As described in section 5.1.1 and presented in Figure 5, the PSIP was rolled out incrementally over four years, with phase 1 schools receiving PSIP grants for the first time in school year 2010/11 and the final phase, phase 4 schools, receiving PSIP grants for the first time in 2013/14.

The phased implementation of the PSIP offers the opportunity to define treatment and comparison groups in different ways. I define the treatment group as phase 2 schools and a comparison group of phase 4 schools. The identifying assumption is that, in the absence of the PSIP, education quality indicators in phase 2 schools (treatment) would have been affected by other time-varying factors in the same way as education quality indicators in

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phase 4 schools (comparison). The validity of this ‘common trend’ assumption is explored in subsequent analysis.

Alternative options would be to construct a treatment group of phase 1 or phase 3 schools and then to consider the most appropriate counterfactual. To consider phase 1 schools as treatment schools is likely to be problematic for two reasons. First, phase 1 schools (districts) were purposefully selected based on their poor performance across a range of indicators. Second, phase 1 schools (districts) received both technical and financial support from a USAID-funded programme over a two-year period. These factors suggest that an appropriate counterfactual would be difficult to define. Phase 3 schools could be a viable option but being only one year before phase 4 implementation, such an approach would shorten the time period within which I can observe any potential impacts and risk overlap between ‘the start’ of the treatment.

As described in section 5.1.1, schools not yet enrolled in PSIP received grants through the Direct Support to School (DSS) programme. It is therefore important to highlight that I estimate the effect of the PSIP against the comparison of the DSS programme (for further discussion on DSS, see Chapter 3, section 3.3.4).

The PSIP “treatment” comprises training provided to schools, communities and district officials in the year prior to grant disbursement as well as the grants themselves (section 5.1.1). Given the training takes place towards the end of the school year and the EMIS data is collected in March each year, I consider 2011/12 as the first year of treatment for phase 2 schools despite training being provided at the end of 2010/11.

The discussion on timing and, in particular when the treatment is considered to be “on” relates to the previous discussion in section 5.1 on the difference between intent and actual implementation. Reports from the Ministry of Education suggest that some schools did not receive their grants on time (although still within the school year) while other schools did not receive their grants at all (Government of Malawi 2013b). The imprecision around the exact start of treatment poses a challenge to the analysis; I return to this in section 5.5 and again in the conclusion. It is also important to note that there are no available data on grant receipts for all schools and therefore I need to be cognisant that the estimated effects are likely to be conservative impact estimates given the evidence of inconsistent implementation.

5.3.2. Identification and estimation

As a base model, I compare the changes in indicators of education quality across treatment and comparison groups starting in 2011/12. Controlling for potentially confounding factors, I estimate the following difference-in-difference model:

$$Y_{s,t} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{PSIP}_s + \beta_2 \text{YEAR}_t + \beta_3 (\text{PSIP}_s * \text{YEAR}_t) + \beta_4 Z_{t,s} + \mu_s + \varepsilon_{t,s} \quad (1)$$

where $Y_{s,t}$ is the value of the indicators of education quality in school (s) in year (t). The coefficient β_3 is the difference-in-difference estimate of the average causal effect of PSIP on the indicators of education quality relative to the comparison schools. β_0 is the intercept showing the average indicator of education quality of the treatment and comparison schools. PSIP_s is a dichotomous variable that is equal to 1 if a school received a PSIP grant for the first time in phase 2 (2011/12) and 0 if a school is due to receive its first PSIP grant in phase 4 (2013/14). YEAR_t is a dichotomous variable that equals to 1 for school year 2011/12 (one year after the intervention started in the treatment schools) and 0 for school year 2010/11. $Z_{t,s}$ is a vector of time varying school characteristics available in the dataset that may influence education quality, including pupil to teacher ratio and the number of support and supervision visits made to the school each year by district officials. μ_s is a school fixed-effect that captures all school and community level factors that vary across schools but are fixed over time. This will eliminate unobservable cross-sectional school and community differences that may affect indicators of school performance; for example, the characteristics of the community that surrounds the school. $\varepsilon_{t,s}$ is the school level error term that includes all the unobserved school characteristics that I assume are uncorrelated with the explanatory variables.

Adapting the base model (1), I explore the variation in the partial treatment effect on “very large schools”. I do this by generating a “very large school” dummy identified using the enrolment threshold (see section 5.1.1) and interacting it with the PSIP treatment dummy. I also explore the extent to which the PSIP effect may vary based on length of exposure to the PSIP. I estimate model (1) using OLS and cluster standard errors at the school level (Bertrand et al. 2004). This clustering corrects for heteroscedasticity (within grades in the school) and serial correlation (within schools over time).

5.3.3. Threats to identification

The use of difference-in-differences should control for observed and unobserved time-invariant school characteristics; it also controls for time-varying factors common to both comparison and treatment schools that might be simultaneously correlated with PSIP and with indicators of education quality. The difference-in-difference estimator uses the change in the comparison group as an estimate of the true counterfactual: what would have happened to the treatment group if there were no intervention (Angrist and Pischke 2009; Wooldridge 2015). The key identifying assumption is that the change in the comparison group is an unbiased estimate of the counterfactual. As noted above, there are a number of situations under which this assumption would not be true.

Omitted time-varying factors

One of the major threats to the validity of the identification strategy is that there may be factors that vary over time and that affect the treatment and comparison groups differently and that are correlated with both treatment status and the education quality measures (Wooldridge 2015).

There are two main ways that this might happen. The first is the result of selection into treatment. As discussed, this would have been more of a concern had I selected phase 1 schools as the treatment group but it remains a potential threat. Phase 2 schools (districts) were selected as being those that were perceived as having the capacity to implement PSIP before phase 3 and 4 schools (districts). In this sense, selection into treatment is based on location-specific time-varying information.

It is also possible that there are other omitted location-specific time-varying factors that affect treatment and comparison groups differently and which could therefore confound the analysis (Kim and Steiner 2016). Examples include a natural disaster that befalls either treatment or comparison districts or additional international donor support that targets a subset of districts that lie within either the treatment or comparison groups.

Whilst there were some cases of natural disaster in Malawi during the period (for example, flooding in Nsanje district), there were no cases within the treatment and comparison groups. It is impossible to rule out differential levels of international donor and local Non-Governmental Organisation support to education that varies both across time and districts during the course of the roll out of the PSIP. However, the only

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systematic support for the PSIP was provided through USAID and targeted the start up in the six phase 1 districts.

Compositional changes

There would be a potential issue if there was evidence to suggest that students and schools modify their behaviour in response to the PSIP and in so doing change the characteristics of the treatment and comparison groups as a result (Wooldridge 2015; Kim and Steiner 2016). This could include parents learning about the programme in a neighbouring district and deciding to switch their children from a comparison to a treatment school. It could also result from schools manipulating their enrolment data in order to be categorised as a “very large school” and therefore benefit from higher grants.

There was no widespread communications campaign that ran alongside the roll out of the PSIP. While this does not rule out parents learning about the programme through word of mouth, it is unlikely that there would have been an expected benefit from the programme that would have justified a parent incurring the costs associated with switching schools for their children for this reason.

The compositional challenge for “very large schools” is a possibility and can be tested by examining whether or not there is evidence that school enrolments around the threshold appear to spike as schools join the PSIP roll out (see section 5.5).

Differential trends over time

The core assumption of the difference-in-differences model is that in the absence of the intervention, the treatment units (phase 2 schools) would have continued on the same “parallel” trajectory as the control units (phase 4 schools), as they had done prior to the introduction of the programme (Meyer 1995; Wooldridge 2015; Kim and Steiner 2016). However, if the secular time trend in the treatment schools is different from the secular trend in the comparison schools then the change in measures of education quality of the comparison group would not be an unbiased estimate of the counterfactual (Wooldridge 2015).

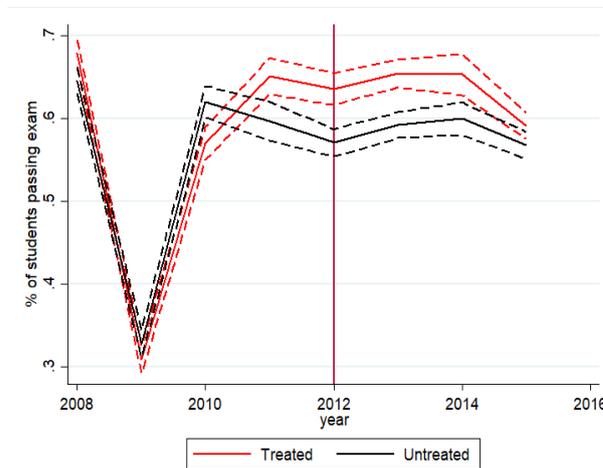
Looking at pre-trends is one way of providing evidence on whether the parallel trends assumption is reasonable, noting that I cannot know or test whether the treatment group

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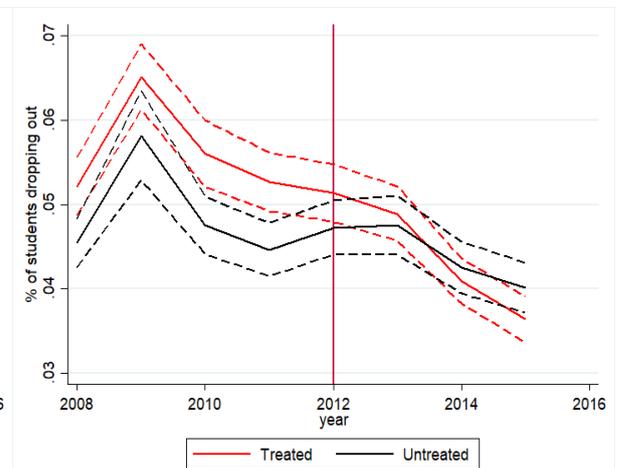
would have had the same trend in the absence of treatment (Wooldridge 2015; Kim and Steiner 2016).

Graphs 1 to 4 depict the trends over time for the four education quality indicators, from 2008 to 2015, with an indication of when treatment started in 2012. The solid lines represent the trends in the point estimates while the dotted lines indicate the 95 per cent confidence intervals for the estimates. Where the red and black dotted lines overlap, there is no statistical difference between the point estimates for the treatment and comparison groups.

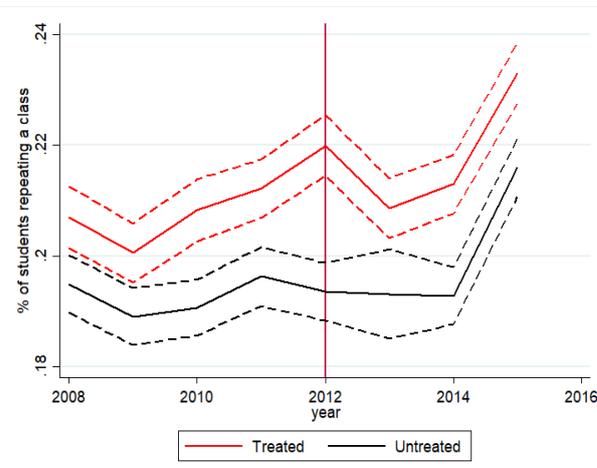
Graph 1 Exam pass rate



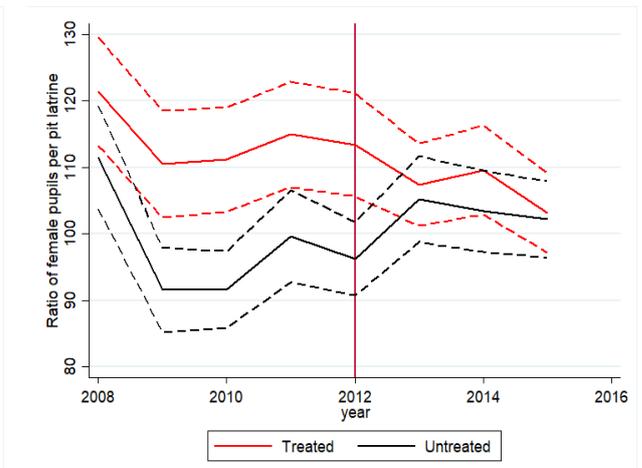
Graph 2 Dropout rate



Graph 3 Repetition rate



Graph 4 Female pupils per pit latrine



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While the trends appear to be parallel in the period 2008 to 2010, there is a suggestion of an anticipation effect in each of the four figures with the trends starting to diverge in 2011. For the treatment group (phase 2 schools), 2011 is the year in which the training takes place ahead of the disbursement of the PSIP grants in 2012. For reasons discussed above in terms of the timing of the training and the first grant disbursement, I have argued that it would be more suitable to consider 2012 as the first year of treatment for phase 2. The evidence from Graphs 1 to 4 suggests that 2011 could be more appropriate. As a robustness check (section 5.5), I explore further the implications of identifying the start of treatment in 2011 rather than 2012.

In addition to a potential anticipation effect, there is an unusual pattern in the exam pass rates during the pre-treatment period with a very large dip in results in 2009. To a lesser extent, there is a similar looking spike in dropout rates in the same year. Whilst there is no available data to explain what lies behind this, there are known challenges related to the reliability and validity of the Primary School Leaving exam as a stable indicator of education quality over time.

Much like the design and implementation of national exams across sub-Saharan Africa, Malawi's end-of-cycle primary leaving exam is norm rather than criterion referenced. Whilst such an approach is valid as a means to select and sift students who will progress to higher levels of education, it is less robust in terms of making statistically reliable comparisons of data points over time. It is possible that a change in approach to the design and implementation of Malawi's Primary Leaving Exam in 2009 could explain this unusual pattern. Some comfort can be drawn from the fact that both treatment and comparison groups appear to have been affected in similar ways; these threats will be analysed in more detail in section 5.5.

5.3.4. Analytical sample and baseline characteristics

The total number of public primary schools in Malawi remains steady over time both overall and across the phases. In 2007/8 there were 4,953 public primary schools and in 2014/15, 4,938 public primary schools. The number of schools in phase 2 is approximately 1,100 across all years, while there are approximately 1,400 schools in phase 4. Phase 4 covers four more districts than phase 2 which explains the larger number

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of schools. Appendix 9.9 presents the number of public primary schools by year and phase for all the years I have in the panel.

I consider 2009/10 to be the baseline year, one year prior to the start of the introduction of the PSIP. At baseline, there are 1,102 schools in phase 2 (treatment) and 1,386 schools in phase 4 (comparison). For the first three years of PSIP, the “very large school” threshold affected approximately 4 per cent of schools. When it reduced from 2,000 to 1,000 pupils in 2013/14, approximately 28 per cent of schools received additional per capita grants over the base rate.

It is important to note that not all schools enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam. To check on whether there are unobservable characteristics of being a school that enters pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam which are also associated with the outcomes of interest, I do a robustness check that assesses the probability of being a school that enters pupils for exams (see section 5.5).

Table 6 shows summary statistics for the education quality indicators in 2010 (baseline) for all schools as well as for the treatment (phase 2) and comparison (phase 4) schools. In 2010, treatment schools had slightly worse measures than both comparison schools as well as the full population of schools across all four dependent variables. For example, in 2010, the exam pass rate in treatment schools was 57 per cent compared with 62 per cent in comparison schools and 64 per cent across all schools. In terms of dropout, 5.6 per cent of pupils dropped out of treatment schools against 4.7 per cent in comparison and 5.3 per cent across all schools.

Table 6 also shows the mean education quality indicators in 2013, a year after the start of treatment for phase 2 schools. I can therefore compute the difference in mean values before and after treatment and in so doing present a naïve difference in difference. Looking at the difference in changes between treatment and comparison across the two time periods, there is suggestive evidence that treatment schools made gains when compared with the changes in values of the comparison schools. Treatment schools made an 11 percentage point gain in exam pass rates as well as a small reduction in dropout rate and a reduction in the number of female pupils per pit latrine. There is no change in repetition rates.

Table 6 Average measures of education quality before and after treatment

<i>Variable</i>	All schools		Treatment	Control	Difference
	Mean	SD	(phase 2) (i)	(phase 4) (ii)	T – C (iii)
Exam pass rate (2010)	0.64	0.31	0.57 (0.01)	0.62 (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)
Exam pass rate (2013)	0.64	0.32	0.65 (0.008)	0.59 (0.008)	0.06*** (0.01)
<i>Change in mean pass rate</i>	0		0.08	-0.03	0.11
Dropout rate (2010)	0.053	0.07	0.056 (0.002)	0.047 (0.002)	0.009*** (0.002)
Dropout rate (2013)	0.049	0.06	0.049 (0.002)	0.048 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
<i>Change in mean drop rate</i>	-0.004		-0.007	0.001	-0.008
Repetition rate (2010)	0.20	0.10	0.21 (0.003)	0.19 (0.003)	0.02*** (0.004)
Repetition rate (2013)	0.20	0.12	0.21 (0.003)	0.19 (0.004)	0.02*** (0.005)
<i>Change in mean repetition rate</i>	0		0	0	0
Female pupils per pit latrine (2010)	104	97	111 (3.99)	92 (2.94)	19*** (4.87)
Female pupils per pit latrine (2013)	106	95	107 (3.16)	105 (3.30)	2 (4.59)
<i>Change in pupils per pit latrine</i>	2		-4	13	-17

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

5.4. DIFFERENCE-IN-DIFFERENCE ESTIMATES

Estimates of the average treatment effect of PSIP on the indicators of education quality are presented sequentially in tables 7 to 10 below. The estimates are based on base model (1) with the addition of year fixed effects in columns two and four of each table. Four control variables are included in each estimation, namely school enrolment, the pupil to teacher ratio, the proportion of teachers with a senior secondary school certificate⁴⁹ and the number of support and supervision visits made to the school each year by district officials.⁵⁰ These time-varying school characteristics are included given their potential association both with the PSIP and the dependent variables. For clarity of presentation, the estimates for these four control variables are not included in the tables that follow.

While each observation represents a specific school in a given year, there are fewer schools (and therefore observations) for the estimation of the effect of the PSIP on the Primary Leaving Exam given that approximately 20 per cent of schools within the sample do not enter pupils for these exams. The coefficients of interest are the interactions *postXPSIP* and *postXPSIPXlarge*, represented in the tables by “PSIP effect” and “PSIP x large school” effect. The “large school” effect accounts for the interaction between the PSIP estimation with those “very large schools” receiving additional per capita grants.

The base model estimates suggest that the PSIP is associated with an improvement in the proportion of pupils passing the Primary Leaving Exam (Table 7). The average treatment effect on the phase 2 schools is a 6.1 percentage point increase in the exam pass rate, dropping to 3.8 percentage points when year fixed effects are introduced. While the coefficient for the PSIP effect reduces slightly with the introduction of the “very large school” interaction effect, the partial effect of PSIP on “very large schools” is greater and up to 8 percentage points with year fixed effects included. Given a mean baseline exam pass rate of 57 per cent, this improvement implies a 14 per cent increase in the proportion of pupils passing the Primary School Leaving Exam in “very large schools”. Across all these results, the coefficients of interest are all statistically significant at least the 5 per cent level.

⁴⁹ Primary school teachers must have a minimum of a Junior Certificate of Education but there are some teachers who have a senior secondary education certificate, the Malawi Certificate of Education.

⁵⁰ This vector of school characteristics was captured by *Z* in base model (1).

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Table 7 Effect of the PSIP on exam pass rate

<i>Pass exam</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	0.031*** (0.008)	0.025** (0.012)	0.018* (0.01)	0.015 (0.016)
PSIP effect	0.061*** (0.011)	0.038*** (0.013)	0.070*** (0.012)	0.041** (0.017)
large school			0.050*** (0.017)	0.053*** (0.018)
PSIP x large school			0.060** (0.028)	0.080*** (0.027)
Observations	12,616	12,616	12,616	12,616
R-squared	0.036	0.138	0.038	0.139
# of schools	1,969	1,969	1,969	1,969
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 8 Effect of the PSIP on school dropout

<i>Dropout</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	-0.003** (0.001)	0.005*** (0.002)	-0.004*** (0.001)	0.005** (0.002)
PSIP effect	-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.005** (0.002)	-0.010*** (0.003)
large school			0.005 (0.003)	0.004 (0.003)
PSIP x large school			-0.003 (0.006)	-0.002 (0.006)
Observations	17,389	17,389	17,389	17,389
R-squared	0.022	0.029	0.023	0.030
# of schools	2,502	2,502	2,502	2,502
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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The results in Table 8 show that the PSIP is associated with a 0.7 percentage point reduction in school dropout across all schools which rises to a 1.1 percentage point reduction with the inclusion of year fixed effects. By contrast, the “very large school” interaction has no statistically significant effect on the average school dropout rate and nor does it have a substantive effect on the estimated PSIP effect on average school dropout which remains constant. Given a mean baseline dropout rate of 5.6 per cent, a 1.1 percentage point reduction implies an almost 20 per cent reduction in the proportion of pupils dropping out of school.

The results in Table 9 suggest that there is no observable effect of PSIP on the repetition rate whether on average across all schools or through an interaction effect with “very large schools”; not one of the coefficients of interest is statistically significant. Of the four indicators of education quality used in this analysis, the repetition rate is the hardest to measure with accuracy. This could explain why it is the only one of the four indicators that does not report a statistically significant association with the PSIP.

The estimated effect of the PSIP on the number of female pupils per pit latrine is presented in Table 10. The PSIP is associated with a reduction in the number of female pupils per pit latrine of approximately nine female pupils across all schools. Whilst this result is statistically significant at the five per cent level across all schools, the statistical significance drops off with the inclusion of the “very large school” interaction.

This change in statistical significance and the substantive difference in the level of the estimation suggests that it is “very large schools” driving the impact of the availability of female pit latrines. On average, for “very large schools”, there are approximately 55 fewer girls per pit latrine as a result of a school participating in the PSIP. With a baseline of 111 female students per latrine, the results suggest that for “very large schools”, this ratio reduces to 56 female students per latrine. This represents a fifty per cent reduction and is a substantive impact on the accessibility of female toilet facilities in schools.

There is a logic to this result. With increased resources available to the schools because of the additional per capita grant above the base rate, as well as the high number of students (male and female) in these schools, it is possible that the school management focused its attention more on school infrastructure. The school grants were not big enough to enable schools to build new classrooms and so pit latrines would have been an understandable target.

Table 9 Effect of the PSIP on class repetition

<i>Repetition</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	0.01*** (0.002)	0.002 (0.004)	0.011*** (0.003)	0.004 (0.004)
PSIP effect	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.004)	0.0001 (0.003)	-0.0002 (0.004)
large school			-0.001 (0.005)	0.0005 (0.005)
PSIP x large school			0.008 (0.008)	0.010 (0.008)
Observations	17,389	17,389	17,389	17,389
R-squared	0.035	0.038	0.035	0.039
# of schools	2,502	2,502	2,502	2,502
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 10 Effect of the PSIP on the number of female pupils per pit latrine

<i>Pit latrine</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	-2.56 (1.91)	5.12* (3.01)	-1.69 (1.83)	2.46 (3.18)
PSIP effect	-8.54** (3.59)	-8.96** (4.09)	-3.89 (2.88)	-2.33 (3.46)
large school			-9.75 (6.12)	-10.38* (6.17)
PSIP x large school			-54.54* (29.10)	-55.46* (29.17)
Observations	10,737	10,737	10,737	10,737
R-squared	0.064	0.066	0.074	0.075
# of schools	2,340	2,340	2,340	2,340
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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The results presented in Tables 7 to 10 are broadly in line with what could have been predicted based on the “naïve” differences between the before and after mean values presented in Table 6. While there was no discernible change in the repetition rates, the data in Table 6 did suggest an association between the PSIP and exam results, dropout and the availability of pit latrines for female pupils.

In an extension of the analysis, I look at whether the effect of the PSIP varies according to length of exposure to the PSIP intervention. The standard difference-in-difference model imposes the assumption that decentralisation affects outcomes immediately and that the effect is constant over time. However, policy changes usually take time to be implemented and the impact of educational policies is likely to be cumulative. Evidence from the U.S. suggests that there can be a time lag of up to 8 years between the implementation of a school-based management model and any observable impact on student test scores, although intermediate effects may be more rapidly identifiable (World Bank 2007:13).

The results of this analysis are presented in four tables in Appendix 9.12, and include estimates of the PSIP effect one, two and three years into implementation from the baseline year in 2010/11. The association with the exam pass rates is significant and steady through the first two years but then drops its statistical significance in the third year. The results on school dropout are steady, statistically significant across all three years and in line with the results presented in Table 8 above. As with the main results for the association between the PSIP and repetition rate, there is no discernible effect in each of the three years. The results on the availability of pit latrines for female pupils is steady and in line with the main results presented in Table 10 for the average effect across all schools.

5.5. ROBUSTNESS CHECKS

This section explores the data further to understand whether the threats to identification discussed in section 5.3.3 are substantiated in the data. I consider four challenges. First, I analyse the pre-treatment period. Second, I consider the apparent anticipation effect in 2011. Third, I explore whether there are characteristics of being a school that enters pupils for the Primary School Leaving Certificate which are also associated with the outcomes of interest. Fourth, I analyse whether there is suggestive evidence that schools near the “very large school” threshold may be inflating or ‘gaming’ their enrolments to qualify for additional grants.

The analysis of parallel trends in section 5.3 suggested evidence of anticipation effects as well as some unusual pre-treatment patterns, particularly in terms of the trend in exam pass rates. While I cannot directly test the identification assumption that the change in comparison schools is an unbiased estimate of the change in treatment schools if they were not treated, I can provide supportive evidence on this core assumption by analysing the balance in the pre-intervention trends (see, for example, Gertler et al. 2012).

If the secular trends of the treatment and comparison schools were the same in the pre-intervention period (at t'), then it is likely that it would have been the same during the post-intervention period (at $t > t'$) without the intervention. In this case, the change in the comparison group would likely be a valid estimate of what would have been the change in outcomes in the treatment schools if they had not had PSIP.

To test the balance in the pre-treatment trends, I assume that the treatment started midway through the pre-treatment period and estimate a difference-in-difference by running base model (1) for the pre-treatment period (2007/8 to 2009/10).

In this specification, the test $\beta_3 = 0$ (see base model 1) is equivalent to the test of the equality of the pre-intervention trends between treatment and comparison schools. Table 11 shows the results of this estimation. The coefficient β_3 is represented in the table by “pre-trend”. The results for each of the “pre-trends” are not statistically different from zero. Although the movements in pre-treatment trends appear irregular based on the graphical representations in graphs 1 to 4, these results provide some confidence and support for the results presented in tables 7 to 10.

Table 11 Robustness check: balance in pre-treatment period

	<i>Pass exam</i>		<i>Dropout</i>		<i>Repetition</i>		<i>Pit latrine</i>	
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
pre	0.051***	-0.064***	-0.006***	-0.0008	0.004	0.007**	0.887	-2.55
	(0.010)	(0.013)	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(2.00)	(2.73)
pre-trend	-0.012	-0.012	0.004	0.004	0.002	0.002	-1.38	-1.28
	(0.016)	(0.016)	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.004)	(0.004)	(2.65)	(2.66)
Obs.	4,035	4,035	6,764	6,764	6,764	6,764	3,545	3,545
R-squared	0.009	0.095	0.002	0.011	0.001	0.003	0.000	0.007
# schools	1,057	1,057	1,700	1,700	1,700	1,700	1,283	1,283
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

While the pre-treatment trends across the outcomes of interest appear parallel in the period 2008 to 2010, there is a suggestion of an anticipation effect in each of the four graphs with the trends starting to diverge in 2011 (section 5.3.3). As presented in section 5.3.1, pinpointing the exact start of the PSIP is not straightforward; the programme is a package of interventions, comprising training to schools and communities as well as the disbursement of the school grants. The analysis is based on a start date of 2012, the year in which phase 2 schools were due to receive their PSIP school grants for the first time. It could be argued, however, that the start year should be defined as 2011; the year in which schools and communities were due to receive training in school improvement planning and financial management. To explore this further, I run base model (1) with a start date of 2011 and consider the results.

In Tables 12 and 13, I present the results of the base model regressions with a treatment start year of 2011. These two sets of estimates, first on exam pass rate and second on the availability of pit latrines for female students, are the equivalent of tables 7 and 10 from section 5.4.

Table 12 Effect of the PSIP on exam pass rate (start 2011)

<i>Pass exam</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	0.044*** (0.008)	0.013 (0.012)	0.037*** (0.008)	0.0044 (0.012)
PSIP effect	0.131*** (0.012)	0.078*** (0.014)	0.127*** (0.013)	0.072*** (0.0145)
large school			0.051*** (0.016)	0.058*** (0.017)
PSIP x large school			0.162*** (0.038)	0.173*** (0.037)
Observations	12,616	12,616	12,616	12,616
R-squared	0.055	0.140	0.058	0.143
# of schools	1,969	1,969	1,969	1,969
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 13 Effect of the PSIP on female pupils per pit latrine (start 2011)

<i>Pit latrine</i>	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
post	-1.5 (1.97)	11.50*** (3.42)	-1.39 (1.86)	10.38*** (3.26)
PSIP effect	-6.24* (3.34)	-9.61** (3.99)	-2.10 (2.67)	-5.45* (3.26)
large school			-9.48 (5.78)	-11.07* (6.01)
PSIP x large school			-45.53* (26.45)	-45.97* (26.47)
Observations	10,737	10,737	10,737	10,737
R-squared	0.062	0.067	0.069	0.073
# of schools	2,340	2,340	2,340	2,340
School FE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Year FE	N	Y	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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For the exam pass rate (Table 12), the effect sizes are larger, particularly for the marginal effect on “very large schools”. With a start year of 2011, the PSIP is associated with a 17.3 percentage point increase in exam pass rate as compared with an 8 percentage point increase based on a 2012 start. Conversely, the PSIP is associated with approximately 46 fewer female students per pit latrine based on a 2011 start year (Table 13) as compared with 55 fewer students based on a 2012 start year. The difference in estimates between the dropout rate and repetition rate results (comparing 2012 with 2011 start dates) are not substantive and therefore not presented here.

Given there is not a clear starting point for the PSIP intervention, one could argue that what is observed in the graphs in section 5.3.3 as well as the two tables above, represents the staggered start of the PSIP rather than an anticipation effect per se. In other words, the majority of phase 2 schools may have already received their training and started to mobilise and act accordingly ahead of receiving their first PSIP school grants. Our expectation, however, would be that the estimates based on a 2011 start year would more likely be substantively less than the 2012 start year estimates albeit indicating a similar direction of the effect. The estimates on the availability of pit latrines are broadly in line with this expectation whereas the larger exam pass rate estimates are more difficult to explain, particularly in light of the evidence on how long it can take for interventions to have an effect on learning outcomes (World Bank 2007).

The third test is to check whether or not there are characteristics associated both with being a school that enters pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam and with the outcomes of interest. To do this, I check the characteristics of a school that determine the probability that a school does not enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam (Table 14). To do this, I regress a binary variable which is equal to one if a school does not enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam and 0 if it does, on the outcomes of interest alongside two covariates (enrolment and Pupil to Teacher Ratio).

The evidence from Table 14 suggests that there are systematic differences between schools that enter pupils for the Primary Leaving Exam (exam schools) and those that do not. Non-exam schools are more likely to have a higher dropout rate, and a greater availability of pit latrines for female students. These schools also appear to be smaller as one would expect if the schools do not include the exam class (Standard 8). More specifically, the results suggest that an additional student increases the probability of

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being an exam school by 0.03 percentage points and a 10 percentage point increase in the dropout rate decreases the probability of being an exam school by 10.3 percentage points.

As discussed in section 5.2.2, whilst systematic differences between exam schools and non-exam schools may not pose a threat to the internal validity of the estimated results on Primary Leaving Exams presented in section 5.4, these differences do pose a threat to the external validity of these results.

Table 14 Probability of being a non-exam school

<i>Non-exam school</i>	(1)
Enrolment	-0.0003*** (0.000)
Pupil to Teacher ratio	0.0007*** (0.000)
Repetition rate	-0.096 (0.061)
Dropout rate	1.03*** (0.125)
Female pit latrine	0.0002** (0.000)
Observations	17,389
R-squared	0.152
# of schools	2,502
Year FE	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

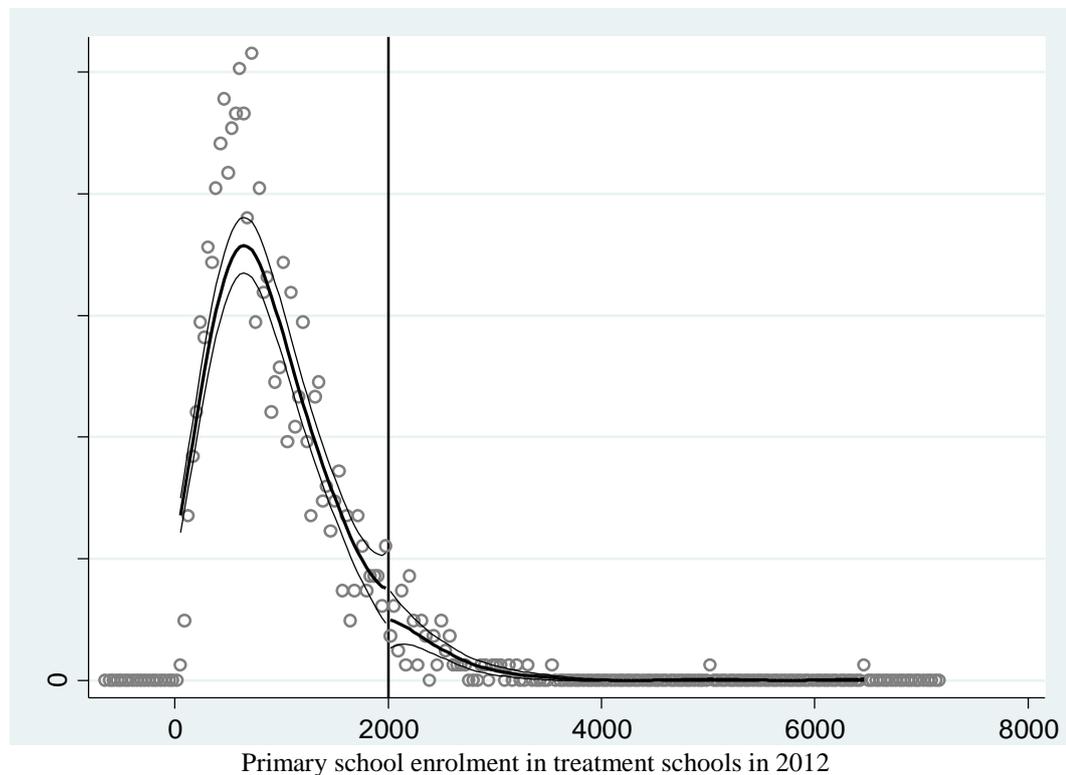
The fourth and final robustness check draws on McCrary (2008) to analyse whether or not there is evidence that schools at or near the “very large school” threshold are overinflating their enrolments in order to qualify for increased PSIP grants and therefore systematically biasing the results. The test draws on regression discontinuity design with a focus on the continuous variable of interest around the threshold, in this case, school enrolment (Lee and Lemieux 2010). The intuition is that if there is evidence of

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manipulation, I would observe a surprising number of observations (schools) just over the 2,000 enrolled pupil threshold and surprisingly few just failing to qualify (McCrary 2008).

The test itself is based on an estimator for the discontinuity at the cut-off in the density function of the continuous variable of interest. The result of this test for the phase 2 schools in 2012 (the year of treatment) is presented in Graph 5. The graph shows the density of school enrolments amongst the treatment schools in 2012 with a cut-off at 2,000 enrolled pupils. The test is a Wald test of the null hypothesis that the discontinuity is zero (McCrary 2008). Whilst one can observe a degree of discontinuity at the threshold of 2,000 pupils, the discontinuity estimate (-.397) is not statistically significant and therefore there is no suggestive evidence of schools ‘gaming’ their enrolments to qualify as “very large schools”.

Graph 5 Density of PSIP treatment schools and the “very large school” threshold



Based on McCrary (2008)

5.6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is a growing body of empirical literature on the relationship between decentralisation and quantitative indicators of education quality in low-income countries although research in sub-Saharan Africa and on national scale programmes remains limited. Evidence to date on the relationship between decentralisation and education quality is mixed. A recent systematic review of school-based decision making and its effect on educational outcomes in low and middle-income contexts calls for further analysis of school-based management reform (Carr-Hill et al. 2015).

In this chapter, I have analysed the effect of a national scale school-based management reform (the Primary School Improvement Programme) on a set of indicators of education quality. As established in the previous chapter, the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) is central to Malawi's objective to "fast-track" decentralisation in the education sector

The headline results suggest that there is an association between the PSIP and improvements in the proportion of students passing their end-of-cycle primary leaving exam, a small but positive impact on school dropout and a positive impact on the availability of pit latrines for female students, with no observed effect on dropout.

There is a substantive impact of the "very large school" interaction both on the proportion of pupils passing exams and even more so on the availability of pit latrines for female schools. "Very large schools" are those that receive additional per capita school grants over and above the base rate common to all schools given enrolments of over 2,000 pupils. Whilst these results provide some evidence that "very large schools" may, in part, drive some of the impact observed across all schools, this is not the case with school dropout. Average school dropout remains constant and statistically significant across all schools but with no significant impact observed through the partial effect of "very large schools".

It is not clear from the analysis what lies behind the "very large school" effect. One or a combination of the following three factors could be driving this. First, it could be associated with the additional resources that these schools are receiving which are enabling schools to build new latrines for girls and to strengthen support for teaching and learning thus supporting improved exam results. Second, "very large schools" may be more likely to be in or near town centres with access to more resources and within communities with

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a higher socio-economic status. While I do not have the data to analyse this further, it could well be that an unobserved wealth effect could be driving the results associated with “very large schools”.

The final robustness check suggests that there is no clear evidence that schools are inflating their enrolments in order to qualify for “very large school” status. If this were the case, however, the additional funds could either be driving improved performance across the measures evaluated here or could be associated with corruption and malpractice in which case I would expect the “very large school” effect to bias the results downwards.

Overall, the results observed in this analysis are not dissimilar to the mixed results from the existing body of empirical research (see Appendix 9.1). Based on the findings from the systematic review on devolving school-based decision-making (Carr-Hill et al. 2015), there is some evidence that devolving decision-making to the school level contributes to relatively small but positive effects on drop-out and repetition. Overall, the review suggests that school-based decision-making and school grant reforms appear to be less effective in disadvantaged communities, particularly if parents and community members have low levels of education and low status relative to school personnel.

Whilst the design and roll out of the PSIP represents a good opportunity for rigorous evaluation, the analysis in this chapter is limited by the quality and availability of the data used. School administrative data are powerful because they are census data across all schools and collected on an annual basis. However, for reasons discussed in section 5.2.2, the validity and reliability of the data may be questionable. As noted in section 5.2.2, if observed impacts are minimal or no impact is detected, the interpretation of the results can be challenging when there is likely to be a high degree of measurement error.

A further data challenge relates to the reliability and validity of the Primary School Leaving exam as an indicator of education quality over time (see section 5.3.2).⁵¹ In the current international policy discourse on learning outcomes, national exams would be seen as crude indicators of education quality, rather than more sensitive, reliable and valid

⁵¹ Validity here refers to whether measures of education quality, including Primary School Leaving exam results, are actually measuring what they are intended to measure with an emphasis on content and construct validity. Content validity is the extent to which the measure includes the most relevant and important aspects of the concept; construct validity is the degree to which a measure reflects accurately the variability among objects as they are arrayed on the underlying (latent) continuum to which the construct refers (Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Sechrest 2005). Reliability here refers to the degree to which a measure yields stable scores over time.

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indicators such as standardised assessments of learning. Yet even standardised assessments of learning may not be as valid an indicator of education quality as one that can encapsulate the more multi-dimensional nature of the concept as discussed in chapter 2 and explored further in the next chapter.

The current global focus on learning outcomes does not adequately relate to the level of effort or inputs required in order to produce the observed outcome. One approach to this is to estimate measures of ‘value add’ (Timmermans et al. 2011; Guarino et al. 2015; Muñoz-Chereau and Thomas 2016). Value added measures are designed to account for the cognitive ability of students as they enter a school and therefore to provide a fairer and more accurate indication of students’ change in learning achievement over time. This could be, for example, when a student completes her primary schooling and again when she completes her secondary schooling.

These measures are being used in contexts like the U.S. and the UK as well as increasingly in Latin America (Guarino et al. 2015; Muñoz-Chereau and Thomas 2016). Although their use in Sub-Saharan Africa is almost non-existent at present, there is some evidence that these measures can be developed in contexts similar to Malawi (Crawford 2017). Further research and policy development in this area may contribute to a more sophisticated and accurate reflection of a school’s level of education quality. At the same time, robust measures of value add demand reliable, valid and linked data on learning achievement at two points in time.

It is clear that a first order policy implication from this chapter is the need for reliable and valid measures of learning outcomes that reveal students’ learning levels at any one point in time. Further, research is needed to develop reliable ways to measure education quality that reflects its multidimensional nature as well as building on the development of value added measures in developing country contexts as a means to indicate the additional contribution that schools make to a student’s learning trajectory.

Of the four education quality indicators used in this study, only the results on repetition rate do not suggest a significant association with the PSIP. Whilst this may reflect that reducing repetition was not an explicit policy aim of the PSIP, it may also relate to further measurement challenges. There is evidence both from Malawi (Ravishankar et al. 2016) and across sub-Saharan Africa on the difficulties of measuring repetition with accuracy (Crouch and Merseth 2017).

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Whilst the phased roll out of the PSIP allows for an analysis that identifies treatment and comparison groups that were phased into the programme at different points in time, challenges remain around a clear definition of the start of the treatment. In the analysis, treatment was considered to start in the year that the first school grants under PSIP were disbursed according to the phase out plan. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the PSIP comprised a package of training as well as the allocation of school grants with the training taking place in the year prior to grant disbursement. As suggested in the analysis of parallel trends in graphs 1 to 4, there is some suggestion of an anticipation effect.

Second, as the discussion in section 5.1.2 suggests, school grants were not always disbursed in the intended timeframe and nor at the levels planned for. Whilst the findings in Chapter 4 point to the underlying political economy dynamics within Malawi that may underpin challenges of effective implementation, further research is needed to understand what enables policy intent to be transformed into effective implementation (Fixsen et al. 2005). Policymakers should also consider what can incentivise effective implementation. One option in the context of the PSIP in Malawi would be for the Government of Malawi to consider paying performance based school grants and thus rewarding schools for make progress against a set of process and/or outcome indicators.

6. EDUCATION QUALITY AND THE PRIMARY SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROGRAMME

Chapter 5 used quantitative methods to assess the relationship between the PSIP and pre-defined indicators of education quality. This chapter uses qualitative methods to do the same, except that an understanding of education quality is not pre-defined at the outset, but rather different perspectives emerge through the empirical work. Through an analysis of primary data from four case study schools, this chapter addresses the final sub-question of the thesis: what is the relationship between different perspectives of education quality and the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP)?

The findings suggest that how education quality is understood is likely to impact on the outcomes of the PSIP. Parents, community, school and district officials understand education quality mainly in terms of tangible inputs and outputs, whereas policymakers' understanding is harder to pinpoint, focusing on the acquisition of skills.

While the findings suggest a relationship between the PSIP and an increasing availability of inputs as well as a link to school-community interaction, particularly in terms of the nature of participation and accountability, the extent to which these changes relate to education quality depend on which perspective of education quality is considered.

Community members' understanding of what it takes to improve education quality shape school-based decision-making, including the allocation of school grants. Unless policymakers make clear an understanding of education quality and the expected outcomes, there is a risk that the PSIP (and, in turn, decentralisation) may contribute to a misalignment between local, national and international priorities.

The chapter begins with details of the methods used. A thematic presentation of the findings follows, starting with understanding education quality. The findings then build on the review of the literature in Chapter 2, with a focus on participation and accountability as two mechanisms that may be central to the link between PSIP and education quality. The discussion draws on the literature to consider the relationship between the PSIP and different perspectives on education quality. In so doing, this chapter sets up the final chapter and conclusion to the thesis, in which the overall relationship between decentralisation and education quality is considered.

6.1. METHODS

This section provides detail on the methodological process followed: case selection, data collection and approach to the analysis; it builds on the overview and justification for the methodological approach adopted in this thesis and presented in Chapter 3 (section 3.4).

6.1.1. Case selection

The aim was to select two pairs of schools, as similar as possible in all respects except for the one difference of interest: PSIP experience. The rationale for such an approach is drawn from Mills' 'Method of Difference', which advocates comparing 'instances in which a phenomenon does occur, with instances in other respects similar in which it does not' (Mill, 1906). The approach should allow for a comparison of school processes in the presence and absence of the PSIP while acknowledging that each school and community has its own (un)observed characteristics that may be particular to its context. Limiting the selection to two pairs of schools allows for a more in-depth exploration in each of the four school sites, providing enough variation to cover different parts of the country, while recognising the research time constraints.

The selection challenge was therefore to identify schools that were as similar as possible except for the time at which PSIP implementation had started. To maximise the difference in stage of PSIP implementation, two schools would be drawn from phase 1 (out of a total of approximately 1,000 schools) and two schools from phase 4 (out of a total of approximately 1,400 schools). Phase 1 schools should have received their PSIP school grants for the first time in school year 2010/11 while phase 4 schools would receive their first grants in the school year following the data collection (2013/14).

The approach taken to case selection here is similar to the approach described in Chapter 5 for the selection of the treatment and comparison groups. Phase 1 schools were chosen here given the greater length of time they had participated in the PSIP at the time of data collection. However, I excluded Phase 1 schools that had received additional support through the USAID education programme; for further discussion see Chapter 5 (section 5.1).

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Quantitative, qualitative and practical considerations guided the initial and eventual selection of the case study schools. To maximise the scope for learning more broadly from the research findings, I wanted the selected schools to be as representative as possible of rural primary schools in Malawi. To guide case selection, I used Government of Malawi school census data from 2009.⁵² a year before the PSIP intervention started, which allowed me to consider the status of the schools before any effect of the PSIP had taken hold.

Notwithstanding socio-economic, cultural and political dimensions, a school with the same number of learners enrolled and with the same number of trained teachers should have the same level of government resourcing in terms of school infrastructure and teaching and learning materials. From a quantitative perspective, I therefore focused on school size and number of teachers per pupil to narrow the identification of comparable schools.

According to the Government of Malawi's school census data, 95 percent of primary schools were categorised as rural in 2009. The average school enrolment for a rural primary school was 669 learners with a pupil to teacher ratio of 95 to 1 and, in statistical terms, a fairly normal distribution, according to the school census data (EMIS). This quantitative analysis formed the frame within which further qualitative and practical considerations could be included.

From a qualitative perspective, the aim was to have each pair of schools set in a similar socio-cultural, linguistic and geographical context. Building on the presentation of the contrasting histories of education in Northern and Central/Southern Malawi (see Chapter 3), one pair would be located in two different districts in the Northern region and one pair in the Central/Southern region.

Practical considerations were also important, including the accessibility of the schools and the distance to travel between each. A major practical challenge did indeed surface during the data collection. The combination of a broken road bridge and a vehicle that was not suitable for off-road driving meant that access to the pre-selected Phase 4 school in the South was not possible. Further analysis of the 2009 data was carried out in the field and a replacement school identified. Taking account of the quantitative, qualitative

⁵² Education Management Information System (EMIS).

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and practical considerations, four schools were selected (see Table 15). To ensure anonymity, all the names of the schools have been changed; in addition, no reference is made to the specific districts in which the schools are located.⁵³

Each of the pairs of schools visited are in neighbouring districts. School enrolments were closer to the national average for rural schools of 669 pupils with pupil to teacher ratios somewhat below the national rural average of 95 to 1. The school that was selected during the fieldwork, South4, has a considerably lower pupil to teacher ratio than the other schools. This could indicate that the school is better resourced and may impact on the comparison. Though not presented in the table, each of the schools was reported in the census data to have a religious “proprietor”, the foundation body that had originally set up the school; prior to the fieldwork, no data was available on which religion.

Table 15 School data used for case study school selection

School name	Region	PSIP phase	No. of pupils	PTR	Distance to town
South1	South	1	649	81	7km
South4	South	4	602	51	11km
North1	North	1	677	75	18km
North4	North	4	622	78	6km

Notes: PTR refers to the Pupil to Teacher Ratio. The data are drawn from the Malawi Education Management Information System (EMIS) 2009.

While case selection set out to disentangle, as best it could, how the presence or absence of the PSIP was observed alongside differences in school processes, it is important to note that there is no clear on/off differentiation between Phase 1 and 4 schools in terms of the PSIP (as discussed in Chapter 5).

At the time of the fieldwork, the two Phase 1 schools were into their third year of receiving school grants through PSIP while the two Phase 4 schools were yet to receive their first

⁵³ The school names given relate to the region in which they are located with a numerical suffix that indicates the PSIP phase. Therefore, South1 is a school located in Southern Malawi and which was part of Phase 1 of the PSIP roll out.

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grant but had received their initial training on school improvement planning and financial management. The fact that the Phase 4 schools had received their first round of PSIP training was likely to make it more difficult to isolate a PSIP effect.

As introduced in Chapter 3 (section 3.3.4), it is also important to recall that the Direct Support to Schools (DSS) programme was operational in those districts that had not yet started to receive school grants through the PSIP. The DSS programme allocated much smaller grants to schools through the district education offices. The DSS funds remained at the district level with each school making procurements for teaching and learning materials and minor classroom maintenance through the district office.

The school data collected on site during the visits in 2013 in Table 16, present additional characteristics of the schools and illustrate the changes to enrolments and pupil to teacher ratios between 2009 and 2013.

Table 16 School data collected during the case study school visits

School name	Region	PSIP phase	Proprietor	No. of pupils	PTR	No. usable classrooms	% passed PSLC
South1	South	1	Muslim	913	83	3	29
South4	South	4	Anglican	662	35	4	83
North1	North	1	Catholic	406	58	7	60
North4	North	4	Anglican	682	57	7	41

Notes: PTR refers to the Pupil to Teacher Ratio; % passed PSLC refers to the proportion of pupils passing the Primary School Leaving Certificate in the previous year (2012). The data were collected on site at the school in June 2013.

Enrolments rose in this period in three of the four schools with a large increase for South1 Primary School (from 649 to 913 pupils). By contrast, enrolment at North1 Primary School dropped by an equally big margin across the same period (from 677 to 406). Except for South1 Primary School and despite rises in enrolments, there were substantial decreases in the pupil to teacher ratios, indicating that government had allocated teachers at a rate that outpaced the increase in enrolment.

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Based both on the data and through observation, the quality and availability of classrooms in the two schools in the Centre/South were considerably worse than the two Northern schools. This reflects the education traditions in the North and Centre/South as discussed in Chapter 3. In terms of foundation body, both Phase 4 schools had been established by the Anglican church while the Phase 1 schools by Muslims and Catholics respectively.

6.1.2. Data collection

The data collection, through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, observation and documentary review, took place in Malawi in May and June 2013. At each of the four schools, I interviewed the head teacher, School Management Committee chairperson and Village Development Committee chairperson. In two schools, I also interviewed the Deputy Head Teacher and in one school, because the head teacher was on maternity leave, I only interviewed the deputy head. I also interviewed either the school's relevant District Education Manager and/or Primary Education Adviser. See Table 17 for the number of interviewees by category. Two focus group discussions were held at each school; one with a group of four parents and another with three teachers. A total of twenty interviews and eight focus group discussions were held.

Table 17 Number of interviewees by category

Interviewee	Count
Head Teacher	3
Deputy Head Teacher	3
School Management Committee Chair	4
Village Development Committee Chair	4
Primary Education Adviser	3
District Education Manager	3

Before starting the interviews and Focus Group Discussions at each school, I met first with the Head Teacher (or, in one case the Deputy) to present an overview of the research project and explain the ethical procedure which I would follow, including that the

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interviewees would not be named and that the school and district names would be anonymised. Each respondent was subsequently asked to read and sign a consent form which included this information (see Appendix 9.3); copies were available in both English and Chichewa. For community members who were unable to read English or Chichewa, the research assistant talked through the consent forms and asked each respondent to provide a thumb print.

Topic guides for both semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were developed. See Appendices 9.6 to 9.8 for examples of the Topic Guides for the Head Teacher, the School Management Committee chairperson and the focus group discussion for parents.

These drew upon the literature discussed in Chapter 2 as well as on the responses to the topic guides used to explore understandings of decentralisation in Malawi, by drawing on the specific things people said to refine and focus the questions in these new topic guides (see Chapter 4).

Exploring the concept of education quality through a topic guide is a challenge. Drawing on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 (see, for example, Hirst and Peters 1970) and my own professional experience of working in education, I started by asking respondents for their views on the purpose of education before distinguishing between how respondents perceived education quality as an ideal-type as opposed to their recognition of education quality in school.

My research assistant translated the topic guides for parents and community members into Chichewa. I then hired an additional research assistant to re-translate the topic guides back into English to check on the validity of the original translation. The re-translated topic guides were sent back for me to make a comparison between the original English topic guide and the re-translated version. I discussed the potential misunderstanding of certain concepts with the research assistant and she modified the Chichewa translation to reflect this. We piloted the topic guides in a school on the semi-urban outskirts of Lilongwe and subsequently refined the guides further, in particular in relation to the clarity and number of questions posed. Although the pilot site was not as rural as the case studies themselves, we did not find this made a substantive difference to the content and approach within the topic guides.

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At each school, I led the interviews and focus group discussions in English (with the school and district staff) while the research assistant conducted the interviews and focus group discussions in Chichewa. All of the interviews and discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim by the research assistant. She also translated the Chichewa transcripts into English. In a similar process to the checks on the topic guide, a sample of two Chichewa transcripts were re-translated to check for consistency.

In addition to the transcripts, field notes were kept both by the research assistant and me. These included details and observations made of school records (including minutes of meetings and details of financial transactions) and enrolment and teacher data held at the school (as per the data presented in Table 16). With the consent of the school, photographs were also taken of school buildings and records displayed and kept within the school office.

6.1.3. Data analysis

Data from the twenty interviews and eight focus group discussions described above were combined with the data on perceptions of education quality from the twenty-one participants sampled for the Lilongwe-based fieldwork (see Chapter 4, section 4.2.2 and Appendix 9.4 for an anonymised list and their institutional affiliations). I became familiar with this data through multiple close readings of each transcript and set of notes. I used the photographs to analyse the school improvement priorities as stated in the schools' school improvement plans; photographic evidence of the financial records also helped me to understand the recorded use of the PSIP school grants and Direct Support to School grants.

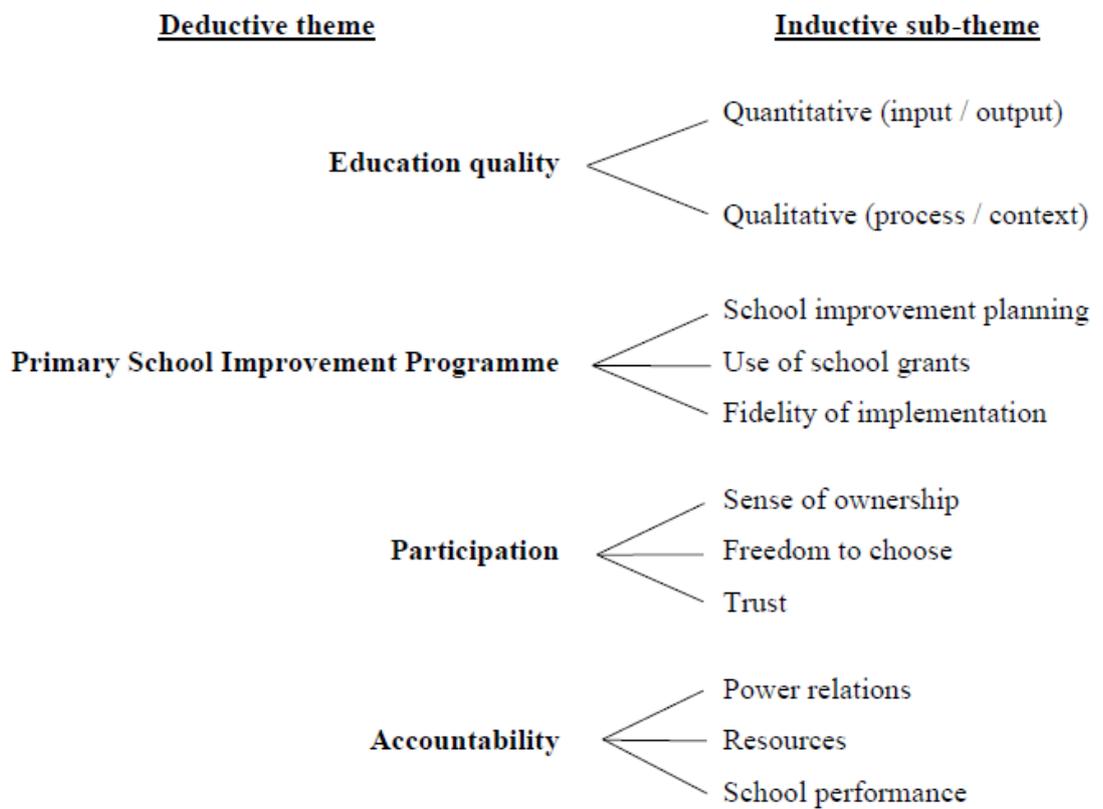
Once a level of familiarity with the data had been achieved, I undertook a thematic analysis (see, Fereday et al. 2006), coding transcripts and inputting data into an Excel spreadsheet. Derived from the review of the literature in Chapter 2 and the research questions presented in Chapter 1, four central guiding themes were used to organise the data: education quality, the Primary School Improvement Programme, participation, and accountability.

These themes were used to provide the deductive elements of the coding frame and provided an initial organising structure to the data. As the data were reviewed closely, an

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inductive approach was taken to allow other themes to emerge from the transcripts. It became clear that these new themes could be grouped and linked to the pre-identified themes. Following Attride-Sterling (2001), a network of themes began to emerge with the four organising themes remaining as headline themes with links to sub-themes under each (see Figure 7).

Figure 7 Thematic network used to organise and code the case study data



6.2. FINDINGS

The findings start with an exploration of education quality from three perspectives: parents and community members; (head)teachers and district-level administrators; and policymakers (national and international). As noted in section 6.1.3, data are drawn from the case study schools as well as the interviews used to explore the nature of decentralisation in Malawi (Chapter 4).

Second, I present findings on how local context shapes policy implementation and highlight how important an understanding of policy implementation is in order to understand the effectiveness of any reform. The extent to which observed differences between schools can be associated with the presence or absence of the PSIP is considered.

Third, findings are presented on the enabling (or disabling) environment within which the schools operate; an environment shaped by international donors, national government, districts and local communities as well as socio-economic, cultural and political factors.

The literature (Chapter 2) suggests that within decentralisation and school-based management reform, participation and accountability are two central mechanisms that can drive improved education quality (as conceptualised from different perspectives). The findings end with a presentation of the evidence on participation and accountability; proximate school and community factors and interactions that may influence processes at a school level and, in turn, may impact on the contested concept of education quality.

The design and school selection process were intended to tease out the effect of PSIP on school processes and education quality. Where possible, the findings are presented in such a way to help the reader understand how the PSIP impacts on school level process and quality. The qualitative methods used do not allow us to attribute cause and effect. Instead, the discussion in this chapter as well as the final chapter that follows, allow me to draw on the findings and discussions from the previous chapters to provide the reader with a more nuanced understanding of the factors that mediate the association between decentralisation and indicators of education quality and understand under what circumstances a causal relationship is more likely to be observed.

6.2.1. Perspectives on education quality

The literature on education quality reviewed in Chapter 2 illustrates its contested and multifaceted nature and suggests two broad categorising techniques: quantitative and qualitative. The following findings present what respondents from three different perspectives believe to be the purpose of education and the core features of a quality education. Comparing these perspectives allows us to understand the extent to which there is a common perception of education quality and the implications for (inter)national reform efforts that aim to improve education quality.

Asking respondents what they think is the purpose of education enables me to understand what interviewees believe quality education means and the extent to which education is considered a means to an end and/or an end in itself.

Community representatives had hopes as to the instrumental value of education. Parents and community members also highlighted the purpose of education as leading to an individual's ability to be 'independent' or self-sufficient in the future. This notion of 'independence' is interesting. It could both denote education as a means to an end, for example in terms of economic independence, or part of the way in which education is an end in itself, for example 'independence of mind' and 'ability to reason autonomously, think critically'.

He can become a president when he receives good education... He also lacks nothing. [School Management Committee]

When our children are educated in future they get a job. Sometimes they become an MP. [Parent]

If you educate a child, she leads an independent life in future. [Village Development Committee]

The specific link between education and jobs is also made at the district/school level alongside a prevalent broader characterisation of the relationship between education and changes to living standards. Skills, both general and specific, are mentioned for the first time at this level, linking them to everyday use for an improved livelihood.

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Education assists somebody or enables somebody to run a company or a job smoothly. [Head Teacher]

[The purpose of education is to] acquire knowledge, gain skills so the individual can use them in everyday life. [Primary Education Adviser]

[Education is a] tool used to prepare people to be responsible citizens...may be to improve their living standards or their social-economic standards. [Head Teacher]

[Education should] equip the learners so that they should be independent in future and to have knowledge on what is going on around the world. [Primary Education Adviser]

The theme of ‘independence’ referenced again in the final quotation above is carried through to the policymaker level which links education to self-determination and the ability for educated citizens to realise their own potential and to take control of their own lives. The idea that an educated individual’s life should be better than an uneducated one is common across all three perspectives.

[Education should] help that individual to realise their potential as a citizen in a country. [Government official]

[Education should] empower citizens to take charge of their own lives. [Government official]

Education should lead to a better life. [Donor]

The different perspectives in Malawi on the purpose of education illustrate a set of common themes. The findings suggest that an educated individual should be in a better position to get a job, have improved living standards and ultimately determine her or his own future. The purpose of education becomes increasingly abstract as one moves from the community up to the policymaker level. The community’s aspirational and deterministic link between education and the potential for high political office or, at the very least, a good job contrasts with the more abstract notion, held by those already in

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high political office, that education can empower individuals to take charge of their own lives. From these perspectives, education is valued in instrumental terms rather than as an end in itself. It is only at the district and school level that an explicit link is made between the skills acquired through education and an improved future.

With a broadly common understanding of the purpose of education, I now turn to how respondents described the features of a “quality” education. This was understood by the respondents in terms of what is needed for education to deliver its purpose.

The features of a quality education at the community level focus on the quantity of inputs and, in some instances, the quality of those inputs, including reference to the quality of teachers and their application to the job.

[We need] enough school blocks and enough teachers for quality education. [Parent]

Features like, teachers should have good accommodation, good water source, and learners should have enough school blocks, enough desks, and enough toilets. [School Management Committee]

When commenting, however, on the extent to which the quality of education has changed over time, representatives of the community referenced changes in the number of students selected to secondary schools as the main indicator. At the same time, they suggested that positive changes could be attributed to an increase in the number of teachers in the school and/or the arrival of a (new) head teacher.

Previously learners were not even selected to go to secondary school. Sometimes only one learner could be selected and sometimes zero. But last year we have seen that many got selected to secondary school because of the teachers we have now and they are working hand in hand with the head teacher. [Village Development Committee]

With the coming of this new head teacher, things have changed for the better. [Parent, North1]

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Communities appear to judge the quality of a school based on secondary school selection and describe the core features of education quality in terms of the quantity of inputs.

For officials and teachers working at school and district levels, there is a continued focus on the quantity of inputs and outputs including a greater focus on process and the quality of the inputs and outputs. They express concern, for example, about the relationship between community members and teachers, about the quality of teaching and also refer to the safety of children. There is, however, some continued reference to the importance of the exam pass rate and the number of students selected for secondary school.

*[Quality education means] having enough teachers, having adequate classrooms, school toilets and [...] teaching and learning materials.
[Head Teacher]*

The moment you involve volunteer teachers and if you come up with a lot of teaching and learning materials, it means learners will have that chance to learn or to have quality education. [Head Teacher]

If we are talking of quality education, we are talking much on the resources. [Primary Education Adviser]

With teachers, decent teacher houses, teaching and learning materials and classrooms blocks in place, more pupils will be selected to secondary school. [Teacher]

If there is good relationship between teachers and the community and between teachers and pupils, the school will easily develop in all aspects. [Teacher]

For policymakers, including donors, there is a focus on the measurable outputs of education as being central features of a quality education, in particular in terms of acquired skills or learning achieved. One donor representative listed a set of indicators that represent the essential features of quality education, including exam pass rate, drop out, repetition, pupil to teacher ratio and selection to secondary school. A government

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official also challenged the idea that exam pass rates necessarily indicate quality education (see discussion in Chapter 5).

*Quality education should be measured really by progression and the achievement level that the children are getting as they are progressing. They should really reach the targets of performance in their grade.
[NGO]*

Quality education necessitates the acquisition of skills as a result of education. There should be some learning. We should get some clear learning outcomes. [Donor]

*If somebody passes the exams and is not able to [read, write, and count], then I don't think there has been quality education.
[Government official]*

While there is broadly a common view of the instrumental purpose of education that leads to a better life, there are clearly different perspectives on the dimensions of a “quality” education and what it takes to improve the quality of education.

Policymakers focus on the acquisition of measurable and generic skills with limited reference to the teaching and learning process and context. Parents and community representatives as well as school and district staff, focus mainly on the quantity of inputs in terms of classroom blocks, teachers’ accommodation and the number of teachers. Concern for the quality of those inputs and the relationship between schools and their communities appears to increase as one moves from the community up to the level of the school and district officials. At both of these levels, there is a common understanding that exam pass rates and the number of students selected for secondary school are important indicators of a quality education.

One interpretation of these findings could be that the policymaker perspective is not grounded in the reality of schools and communities. The policymaker’s perspective on the purpose of education is abstract; it talks of ‘realising potential’ rather than linking it to ‘jobs’ and livelihoods’. The policymaker’s perception of quality education is abstract relative to the more tangible and visible descriptions made by communities and school

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officials; you can see if a school has decent classrooms, enough teachers and whether or not a student has been selected to secondary school, it is much harder to see whether a student has reached a sufficient level of learning.

The discussion section at the end of this chapter will consider how these different conceptualisations of education quality, when linked with the PSIP, determine the nature of the relationship between education quality and decentralisation.

6.2.2. Understanding context: similarities and differences

The case study schools displayed a range of characteristics typical of rural primary schools in Malawi, including demotivated teachers with varied but generally poor quality school infrastructure. Across all four cases, teachers interviewed spoke of how demotivated they felt owing to low levels of remuneration and a lack of accommodation on or near the school site.

Most teachers are frustrated. They come to school and pretend to teach.

[Teacher, South4]

In all four schools, there was a limited supply of textbooks, including for the newly introduced curriculum. Whilst the availability of usable classrooms and the quality of their infrastructure varied, a theme of inadequate and poor quality school infrastructure was evident in all four cases.

We have some desks, but the classrooms are not adequate as you can see. And [living] accommodation for teachers is a problem. [Village

Development Committee, South1]

Alongside examples of factors common across all four schools, unique features were also evident. Two of the schools had faced recent challenges with school leadership. At North1 the previous head teacher had recently been transferred and demoted for poor performance; the newly appointed head teacher was away on maternity leave during the fieldwork. At South1, the head teacher had only been in post for six months, following more than two years without a substantive head teacher. Based on my own knowledge and experience of living and working in Malawi, these circumstances are not uncommon.

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The locations of the schools had specific characteristics. Surrounded by rivers and almost cut off during the rainy season, respondents described the location of North4 primary school as ‘an island’. Its situation near a large sugar plantation also resulted in a local community comprising residents from many different parts of the country, with a range of linguistic and cultural particularities; people had moved to North4 from around the country given the employment opportunities offered by the sugar factory. There were suggestions from interviewees that this sometimes caused tensions within the community that could lead to a lack of cooperation between the community and school on school improvement matters.

Contextual community factors played a role in community attitudes towards education at South1 Primary School. Several informants at South1 reported the common practice amongst teenage boys of travelling to South Africa in search of work, whilst girls await their return for a pre-arranged marriage. It was suggested by the School Management Committee chair that ‘most of the time it is poverty’ that underpins this practice, known as *chitomero* in Chichewa.

The South1 primary school faced a further challenge because almost all of the teachers lived in the nearby town, 14 km away; it was apparent that this had an impact on teacher absenteeism from school and the associated perception of the quality of education provided.

Our biggest challenge here is that only very few of the 12 teachers live within the community of the school [Head Teacher, South1]

Whilst the case study schools displayed characteristics of a typical rural primary school in Malawi based on the range of quantifiable factors discussed in section 5.1.1 (case selection), each local context was sufficiently different that it seemed likely that multiple factors combine to impact on the quality of education.

6.2.3. Policy implementation

The consistency and variation in the implementation of the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) was explored in each of the four sites (see Chapter 5, section 5.1.1 for further discussion on implementation fidelity). For the two phase 1 schools, the PSIP was

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into its fourth year of implementation; each school should have received schools grants through the PSIP for three consecutive years, starting in 2010/11. The phase 4 schools, on the other hand, should have received their first round of training in school improvement planning and financial management with the expectation that they would receive their first school grants in the following school year (2013/14).

The school visits confirmed that the PSIP was generally on track in terms of implementation. The phase 1 schools had received three school grants each, together with training and the two phase 4 schools had received training and were expecting their first PSIP school grant. It is important to note that whilst the phase 4 schools had not received grants as part of the PSIP, they had continued to receive the more restrictive and smaller-scale Direct Support to School (DSS) grants (see Chapters 3 and 4 for more discussion on PSIP and DSS). Table 18 shows the grants that each of the schools had received over the previous five years based on a review of the financial records at the schools during the visits.

Table 18 Grants received by case study schools from 2008-09 to 2012-13

Year	Intended PSIP grant	South1	North1	North4	South4
2008-09	n/a	27,000*	<i>No record</i>	<i>No record</i>	27,000*
2009-10	n/a	51,840*	<i>No record</i>	<i>No record</i>	27,000*
2010-11	250,000	304,000**	241,750**	<i>No record</i>	84,505*
2011-12	300,000	350,000**	340,000**	74,000*	84,000*
2012-13	350,000	200,000**	340,000**	75,000*	47,400*

Notes: All amounts are reported in Malawi Kwacha and as per the stated financial records at the school. * denotes funds received through the Direct Support to School (DSS) programme; ** denotes funds received as School Improvement Grants through the PSIP.

Table 18 illustrates a degree of variation in terms of the level of the grants received and some discrepancy with the intended amount as per the overall PSIP plan. It also illustrates that the PSIP school grants are approximately four times as big as the financing through the Direct Support to Schools (DSS) programme.

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In the first year (2010-11) of the PSIP, schools were due to have received a base rate of MK250,000, rising to MK300,000 in 2011-12 and MK350,000 in 2012-13. The findings here suggest that neither of the two phase 1 PSIP schools received grants in line with what had been intended. Allocations to South1 declined from MK304,000 in year 1 to MK200,000 in year 3, whereas the disbursements to North1 increased from MK241,750 to MK340,000.

When asked why this was the case, the staff at South1 school were unsure. On the one hand, they speculated that a final tranche of funding could be forthcoming from the District Education Office but also lamented the ad hoc timings in terms of when funds are released and in what quantities. There was no sense that the school would be in a position to or even interested to try to hold the District to account for this.

Overall, however, results from a review of the PSIP by the Government of Malawi show that PSIP disbursements to schools improved over the first three years from 70 per cent of total school grants disbursed in 2010/11 up to 88 per cent in 2012/13 (Government of Malawi 2013b); see Chapter 5 (section 5.1.1) and Appendix 9.10.

In addition to the variable levels of release in comparison with the intended allocations, respondents at North1 school suggested that the timing of the actual release of the grant can cause problems, particularly in terms of alignment with the school improvement plan cycle.

We plan here but the money is disbursed late by government. As we are talking now, last year's money is not yet in our account and we are in another year. That is the problem. [Village Development Committee, North1]

Financial records together with responses from interviewees suggested that while there were common areas in the use of the grants across all four schools, there were significant differences too. The purchase of teaching and learning materials and focus on minor school maintenance (e.g. repairing locks on doors) were typical for schools both receiving PSIP school grants and those receiving funds through DSS. The level, discretion and training associated with the PSIP school grants, however, led to schools using the grants to pay for teaching assistants from the local community, school-based training of teachers

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as well as more ambitious maintenance activities, including the construction of new pit latrines.

They procure teaching and learning resources, things like exercise books, pens and flip charts, pencils and others for learning and teachers. Some because of understaffing...they are allowed to engage some teaching assistants from the community [District Official, Phase 1]

The reference to what schools are allowed to do in the quotation above relates to how the schools and communities are trained and the guidelines schools are given both in terms of how School Improvement Plans should be developed, and budgets allocated. All four schools made reference to the training they had received through the PSIP and spoke confidently about how the priorities identified for the School Improvement Plan should align with the priorities of the National Education Sector Plan. While the findings highlighted the beneficial effects of the training, they also referenced frustration related to the need for alignment between school and national priorities as well as the forms and formats that were supposed to be used.

The training gave us direction on what is expected of us as a committee. Our relationship with teachers is good now because we learn together and do things together; school development activities are going on well. [School Management Committee, North1]

We have to submit the school improvement plan two, three or four times before it is finally approved at the [District Education Manager's] office. [Head Teacher, North1]

While a portion of the DSS grant had to be used for teaching and learning materials and another for maintenance and rehabilitation of school infrastructure, the PSIP school improvement plan had to be developed in line with the broad objectives of the National Education Sector Plan⁵⁴ and the budget allocated according to guidelines, as follows:

⁵⁴ The three over-arching priorities of the National Education Sector Plan: (i) quality and relevance (ii) access and equity (iii) governance and management (Government of Malawi 2008a).

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teaching and learning materials (20 per cent); improved teaching and learning (50 per cent); repairs and routine maintenance (20 per cent); school management and administration (10 per cent) (Government of Malawi 2010b). Theoretically, this ensured alignment between central government priorities and budget allocations at the school level, although in practice, understanding of these guidelines as well as the alignment with the National Education Sector Plan priorities were open to interpretation.

Whilst the findings in this section suggest a degree of policy implementation fidelity, the particularities of each school context play an important part in mediating the effects of any reform. There are multiple factors that impact on school process and the PSIP is only one of these. In the next section, the findings suggest additional factors that mediate the community's response to the PSIP.

6.2.4. Enabling environment

The findings suggest that the actions of individuals are shaped by the policy and socio-political environment as well as the behaviours and norms of their (political) leaders. Multiple reference to 1994 and the introduction both of multiparty democracy and the policy of Free Primary Education (FPE), confirms a widely held perception that it marked a pivotal year for Malawi (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

The perceived impact of the 1994 changes on primary education was varied. Respondents commented that prior to 1994, communities took more 'responsibility' for their schools and faith bodies played a greater role in education. Contradicting some of the idea behind decentralisation, this may, in part, explain why government became 'overloaded' [Head Teacher, South1] when primary school fees were abolished in 1994. One could argue that the decentralisation moves in the late 1990s in Malawi was effectively a process of re-decentralisation, returning education to localities as they were pre-1994, but in the absence of the capacity and commitment once provided by faith based organisations.

Respondents also suggested that 1994 was pivotal in terms of how individuals understand their relationship to the state and the services it delivers. Coupled with democratisation and the oft quoted phrase *mphamvu ku anthu* ("power to the people"), interviewees commented on their understanding of 'freedom' and 'human rights'.

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Now what misled people is the human rights people claim to have. People say I have a right to do what I want even when the chief is saying something else. They say I do not care, I have my own rights. Yes, you have the rights but when it comes to development work we need to agree and do the work together. [Parent, North1]

Freedom of anything, freedom of speech, of whatever they want to do. So [parents] think even if they don't send their children to school, they still exercise their freedom. [Head Teacher, South1]

This understanding is developed further by the South1 head teacher as he comments that with ‘decentralisation today, it seems people are freer to do whatever they want’ (head teacher, South1). This association between the idea of freedom and decisions by some parents to distance themselves from schooling and education contrasts with observations made by parents at North4 Primary School.

The difference is that in the past parents were not involved in most of the activities of the school but with the “power to the people” slogan, we [ordinary citizens] have been empowered. People [ordinary citizens] are making decisions and doing things on their own. [Head Teacher, North4]

So, there are two perspectives here: one that connects post-1994 politics to an individualism that can include parental inaction (freedom to do nothing); and one that connects democratisation to people taking responsibility for their own and their community’s development.

While the PSIP increases the potential for local level decision making and resource allocation, central government continues to control the major levers of education policy (see Chapter 3, section 3.3 and Chapter 4, section 4.1). In this regard, respondents commented on the deliberate action of central government policymakers and its associated positive effect on the school. Teachers were referenced most often when respondents commented on reasons why the quality of education had changed over the past three years in the school. Here, the quality of education is understood in terms of the number of teachers at the school.

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The situation improved because of these additional teachers [sent by government]. [Head Teacher, North4]

The number of teachers we have here now is encouraging. [Village Development Committee, South4]

These comments are both made by respondents from phase 4 schools and do not relate to the PSIP reform. Respondents in all schools referenced the vital role that teachers play in contributing to the improved quality of education. Central government continues to control the recruitment and allocation of primary school teachers; it is perhaps for this reason that some respondents reported that it is the responsibility of government to improve the quality of education in schools.

While teachers' role in enhancing education quality appears to be widely shared, teachers from two of the schools (both phase 4 schools) commented on their low status and low levels of motivation relative to other government employees.

We [teachers] are less respected than other [government employees] ...we are socially broke. [Teacher, North4]

To my side I am not motivated. Why do I say I am not motivated? I have been in the service for a long time. I qualified as a PT4 teacher up to now 17 years I am still working as a PT4. And again they are talking of promotions; we don't know what criteria they are using when they are promoting teachers. [Teacher, South4]

While findings here suggest that the PSIP can be perceived as an enabler of positive relations, planning and resourcing at the school level, central government is perceived to retain the critical levers that affect education quality, including the recruitment, allocation and remuneration of teachers.

Respondents at South1 primary school commented on how the actions of current and aspirant political leaders affect the behaviour of parents and community members at the local level. The Head Teacher explains:

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Usually the tendency has been that these party [political] leaders, they always give handouts to community members whenever they are called for meetings. Such tendencies give an implication that whenever community members are called for any meeting, they need to be paid something. [Head Teacher, South1]

The implication here is that unless parents or community members receive money, they will not attend school meetings and participate in other school activities. Participation needs to be paid for. Whilst this was the only one of the four schools that raised this issue, it is not an isolated case in Malawi. Building on the discussions of patronage and neopatrimonialism in Chapters 2 (section 2.2.6) and 4 (section 4.4), these handouts are likely to have a party political and patronage character, securing electoral support for those who make them. These findings could also suggest that the increased availability of resources at the community level may further contribute to patronage and clientelism.

6.2.5. Participation

The final two sections of the findings present evidence on participation and accountability. The findings suggest that school improvement planning and its associated training together with the allocation of resources through school grants can enable more effective engagement between the school and its community and the ability for schools to resolve a number of issues at the school level.

We have seen a number of supplies which are now coming up with a change. People are able to resolve things that they could not resolve in the past. It was a problem for the government to solve but now people are able to sit down and see the problems they experience and find solutions. [Teacher, North1]

This is some kind of a change because at least the government is trying to give a small power so that we can organize things on our own. Of course, with the support from the government, we can have our own initiatives to make things work at school. In the past, we used to rely on the high authorities. [Head Teacher, South1]

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These two quotations also point to a distinction between the PSIP and Direct Support to Schools (DSS) programme; the degree of local discretion over the use and management of the funds under the PSIP as well as the grant amount and associated training were not features of DSS.

On the other hand, the findings highlight that the process of identifying priorities through the school improvement planning cycle and the size of the school grant, can both frustrate and limit the ability of schools and communities to make substantial improvements.

SIP [School Improvement Plan] is a very good thing because it helps to fill in the gaps at a school. But we fail to fill in all the gaps because of the money we receive is not enough. The teachers buy chalk, pencils, and text books using SIP money. [Parent Teacher Association, North1]

In reality, these school improvement plans create a shortfall concerning the resources which [schools] do not have. [District Official, Phase 1]

As alluded to above, the findings do confirm that the PSIP and its associated processes, including school improvement planning and the use of the school grant, can increase the level of community participation in the activities of the school.

I feel the school improvement plans are very good. They are encouraging people to participate. And at the same time, you know these people plan for their schools, they will not be happy to see someone vandalizing their school. Once they do that they are able to make reports or deal with those people who vandalize. And therefore, in this case it clearly shows that school improvement plans in the name of decentralisation it is empowering people to have the ownership of their schools. [District Official, Phase 1]

The training gave us direction on what is expected of us as a committee. Our relationship with teachers is good now because we learn together and do things together and school development activities are also going on well. [School Management Committee, North1]

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Not for the first time, the PSIP training is referenced as a critical input, enabling the community to work effectively alongside teachers in planning for the school's improvement.

The theme of “ownership” emerged clearly from the findings. In some instances, increased community participation was associated with the idea of the community having an increased sense of “owning” the school and responsibility for its improvement.

There is a change because in the past we were waiting for everything to come from the government but now things have changed. We have to be active as the owners. [Parent Teacher Association, North4]

We moulded the bricks and also burnt them. We also collected sand for building. That is why we are saying this school is ours. [Parent, North4]

Respondents attributed this increased sense of ownership (and participation) both to the PSIP but also to the political changes that the “power to the people” slogan encapsulates (*mphamvu ku anthu*). Whilst this positive association between participation, ownership and school improvement was identified by some, others were more circumspect. For some, it was clear that the core inputs required to improve the quality of education continued to be provided by central government whereas in the past, the religious bodies that “own” the schools took more responsibility for many of these inputs, including infrastructure.

Government...is responsible for recruitment of teachers, provision of teaching and learning materials, construction of school buildings, and construction of teachers' houses... In the past the missions or agents were very much responsible in construction of teachers' houses and school blocks. [Head Teacher, South1]

The suggestion here being that local ownership (by religious bodies) was stronger in the past. Several respondents also referred to the reality of ‘forced’ rather than ‘voluntary’ participation in school activities, particularly when it comes to moulding bricks for new teachers’ houses or new classrooms. As discussed in the previous section, participation

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in school activities also depends on whether or not parents or community members expect to receive money to do so.

Participating in the activities of the school, that's where they are lacking. It's only in name that they are owners of the school.... People are forced to take part [Head Teacher, North1]

In addition to the theme of ownership, findings suggest that channelling centrally funded money into school bank accounts to be managed by the school and its community can displace community efforts and lead to increased suspicion that has a knock-on effect on levels of participation. In their third year of receiving school grants through the PSIP, each of the two Phase 1 schools reported related challenges.

When [parents] hear or see that we have received some funds, they shun away from moulding bricks because they say the school has funds and it should use those funds to do that. For example, when we ask them to collect sand or whatsoever is needed for the project, they say to us, remember you have those funds. [Teacher, South1]

There is [the suspicion] that whoever has access to that money can benefit more from that money. It's where the grudges arise. So, each time one has been given the task of being involved in organising for school improvement plan, the other one feels jealousy. Then he/she backs off. They no longer become interested in school improvement planning. [Head Teacher, North1]

Both of the phase 1 PSIP schools also reported that the education levels or capacity within the local community had an effect on the community's willingness and ability to engage fully in the school improvement cycle envisaged by the PSIP.

The problem with people in our community is that whenever we call them, they neglect the call because they are not educated. [Teacher, South1]

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One of the problems that people are bringing is having low capacity levels of some communities. So that for them to participate or contribute fully towards some of the processes is a challenge. [District Official, Phase 1]

While increased participation and an increased sense of ownership were outcomes associated with the PSIP in some circumstances, the findings also suggest that there are a further set of factors that determine whether or not such positive associations hold. These factors include levels of trust within the community, the level of education amongst community members as well as the extent to which patronage and a culture of handouts at the community level affects individuals' decision to participate in school improvement activities.

6.2.6. Accountability

Community and teacher respondents from the two phase 1 schools expressed suspicion and unease about the management and use of the school grants. The level of disquiet depended on the extent to which there was consensus on how the funds should be used and whether or not there was a transparent system that enabled community members to understand and see how the funds are actually used. Paper records of how funds had been used (whether PSIP or DSS) were available at all the schools visited, either written in notebooks or displayed on a board inside the head teacher's (often makeshift) office. In no schools were the records displayed publicly (as per the PSIP guidelines) in an effort to encourage transparency.

At North1 school, the head teacher reported that the school displays information on all the items that have been purchased but not the associated costs. The school had been advised by district authorities not to display actual costs but to make it available if requested by community members. The same head teacher was clearly sceptical about the efficacy of displaying information about grant use. In his view, the community 'feel whoever has access to that money will benefit and that is where the issue lies' [North1 HT]. This scepticism is further supported by a teacher and parent from the same school.

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It is implementation that tells [us] that the money has gone well or astray. [Teacher, North1]

Understanding is a problem in the villages... Only that people do not trust others on the issues concerning money even if you tell them the use [School Management Committee, North1]

A local chief at South1 school confirmed that the community is “involved in such a way that [the school] invites us and informs us about the money received”. The same chief, however, gave an example of a fellow chief who was unable to read and would therefore need a different approach to ensure an understanding of how the resources have been used.

Chief Bounda⁵⁵ was saying: “don't show me these letters where the amount of money is written because I don't know how to read but I want the money to be here and count it. We should see the money physically. [Chief, South1]

This scepticism and the challenges of understanding grant use were not universal. At South4 Primary School, not yet receiving grants through the PSIP, it was reported by a member of the Parent Teacher Association that the community “has confidence in us because we tell them everything and we do things they expect us to do” [Parent Teacher Association, South4]. It is important to note, however, that as a phase 4 school, South4 was receiving DSS funds and therefore the school had no bank account of its own and was not managing the resources itself.

None of the respondents reported that school funds (PSIP or DSS) had been used for unintended purposes but there were reports of such misuse from neighbouring schools. In one neighbouring school to North1, for example, it was reported that the SMC chairperson had contracted a relative to make and repair school desks. Instead of delivering the desks, the relative took the money and travelled to South Africa.

A district official in the same district as North1 commented that the school improvement plan itself is an important accountability tool. As discussed in the previous section, it

⁵⁵ Name changed to ensure anonymity.

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enables community members to develop a common understanding of what the school is trying to achieve and facilitates a sense of school ownership which can lead to action when funds are misappropriated.

One of the advantages of the school improvement plans is that people have been empowered to own their schools. And therefore, if someone misappropriates funds for the school, they are in a position to report.
[District Official, Phase 1]

The official commented that in one school, the community had reported a misappropriation of funds to the police. As a sanction, the head teacher of the school was demoted.

While the school improvement plan may enable a shared understanding and agreement on the intended use of funds, the findings suggest that teachers and community members do not always agree on the intended use.

Some schools are improving and others are not improving because these have brought enmity... most villagers think that that money should be used not the way teachers want to use that money. [PEA, South1]

It was reported by a phase 1 district official that community members are more interested in ‘hardware projects’, using the grants to maintain and construct new school infrastructure (classrooms, teachers’ houses, latrines). This could be driven by the concrete and visible character of such improvement, the opportunities to gain work around such project or a combination of these factors together with a broader appreciation of what quality education means for community representatives. The same official suggested that focusing on improving the quality of education ought to entail using the funds to support improved teaching and learning, for example by developing learning materials from locally available resources or supporting teachers through Continuing Professional Development training.

Accountability for the (intended) use of resources is one facet of the wider culture of accountability. The findings also shed light on accountability as it relates to teacher effort

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and measures of school performance. At North4 Primary School and unrelated to the PSIP, a parent attributed improved teacher behaviour to increased parental participation.

In the past teachers were punishing the learners and some could absent themselves from school because of heavy punishments⁵⁶ but now no more such punishments are given to learners. Again, when a child is not doing well, we now have the right to come and ask the head teacher or teachers why the child is performing poorly. They explain to the parent why. But in the past, it was not like that. [Parent, North4]

This example suggests that parents can voice their concerns and that teachers respond to account for the concerns raised.

A perspective shared across all four schools was that teacher performance and effective leadership at the school were the determining factors associated with changes in exam results. The second quotation below presents further evidence that parents and community members are in a position to voice their concerns to education authorities with a perception that this pressure can eventually lead to a response.

Previously, learners were not even selected to go to secondary school. Sometimes only one learner could be selected and sometimes zero. But last year we have seen that many got selected to secondary school because of the teachers we have now and they are working hand in hand with the head teacher. [Village Development Committee, South4]

When we didn't have a head teacher, teachers were just staying not doing their job....us the chiefs, PTA and SMC continued to visit the [district officials] on the same issue of seeking to be given a head teacher. At last in December [the district] sent us this head teacher. So, with his coming we experienced a lot of changes for the better. [Village Development Committee, South1]

⁵⁶ When probed, punishment here refers to corporal punishment.

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The findings in this section suggest that while displaying information about the use of resources may be necessary, it does not guarantee that all community members will understand or agree with how the resources have been used and nor that the community trusts that the resources have been used effectively. Furthermore, there is a difference between publicly displaying the information and making it available within a headteacher's office. The intended use of resources for school improvement is also contested; some respondents focus on the physical infrastructure of the school whilst others believed a focus on teacher professional development would more likely impact on the quality of education. Parents' concern was not limited to accountability for the use of resources but also for the perceived performance of the school in terms of exam results and, critically, the extent to which teachers are perceived to be carrying out their job effectively. The role of the head teacher came through as pivotal in terms of ensuring teacher attendance and an effective working partnership between school staff to ensure the school works towards improved quality.

6.3. DISCUSSION

The case study design set out to understand the relationship between the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) and education quality, as viewed from different perspectives. While Chapter 5 considered the effect of the PSIP on pre-defined measures of education quality, this discussion draws on the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 to explore the underlying mechanisms and associated factors that mediate the relationship between PSIP and education quality (as construed from different perspectives).

First, I consider the limitations of the case study approach adopted. Second, I draw on the literature in Chapter 2 to reflect on the findings in the context of the suggested mechanisms (participation and accountability) that may theoretically link decentralisation with improved education quality. I then explore the mediating factors related to school context, policy implementation and the broader enabling environment to explore how observed differences between the case study schools could be explained. Finally, approaches to understanding education quality are considered alongside how these relate to the observed similarities and differences across the four case study schools.

The two pairs of case study schools were at different stages of PSIP implementation. The phase 1 schools had received their third school grants through the PSIP while the two phase 4 schools were yet to receive their first grant but had received some PSIP training on school improvement planning and financial management. The fact that the phase 4 schools had already received their first round of PSIP training makes it more difficult to disentangle the extent to which the PSIP may or may not explain some of the observed differences in the schools.

As noted in section 6.1.1, the cases were selected on the basis of available quantitative and qualitative data. The available data were not sufficient for me to know the detail of each school's circumstance at the time of the fieldwork; there was therefore a greater degree of variation between the circumstances in each school than could have been predicted based on the initial selection. For example, a school that had not had a head teacher over a long period of time is likely to respond differently to new policies or programmes compared with a school where there have been no recent interruptions in school leadership.

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Finally, in terms of the methodology, it is important to note that the interviews and observations were carried out at one point in time, therefore relying on respondents' recall to enable them to comment on any change over time.

The PSIP affects levels of community participation in schools in a number of ways. Drawing on Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1969), these vary from 'manipulation' to greater levels of 'citizen control' and with a range of implications for the school-community relationship.

Across both phase 1 and phase 4 schools, findings suggest that the use of school improvement plans and associated training can lead to more regular and constructive community participation which, in turn, can lead to a greater sense of community empowerment and ownership of the school. These factors could lie behind some of the positive results presented in Chapter 5.

It is evident, however, that the notion of school ownership and responsibility for school improvement is contested, which, in turn, suggests a challenge for the principal-agent framework discussed in Chapter 2 (Bossert 1998; Besley and Ghatak 2003). Before considering this challenge, I draw on the different rationales for decentralisation to explore the variation in levels of community participation observed across the case study schools. See Chapter 4 for further discussion on the rationale for decentralisation in Malawi.

Some respondents explained a community's lack of participation in school activities (including those encouraged through PSIP) on account of the "freedom" bestowed on communities since the multiparty elections in 1994 and encapsulated in the concept of "power to the people" (Chapter 4, section 4.3.1). Here, decentralisation through the lens of democracy, good governance and genuine participation, is interpreted at a community level in terms of an individual's choice to opt out from any responsibility associated with school improvement. By contrast, the same notion of "power to the people" is used by others to signify a call to action with a greater sense of responsibility, ownership and engagement in a school's effort to improve.

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Historically, schools' foundation bodies played a pivotal role in the establishment and running of schools across Malawi (Chapter 3).⁵⁷ The findings here confirm that their role has significantly diminished and yet there has been a degree of ambiguity in local communities' role since the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 1994. Some communities have interpreted the abolition of primary school fees as a signal that Government has taken over all responsibility for the delivery of education, while other communities have embraced the decentralisation rhetoric as a call to action. Overall the perception is that the displacement of the foundation body's role is likely to have reduced the genuine sense of local ownership that historically prevailed. The evidence suggests that since 1994, community participation has been extractive rather than collaborative (Bray, 2001). An example of this type of participation includes doing unpaid work on school construction projects.

While the PSIP and its structured planning processes and resources creates an opportunity to move beyond extractive forms of participation, the findings suggest that "pseudo-participation" persists (see Rose 2003b). This is most clearly seen in the case study schools with reference to "forced" rather than "voluntary" participation, even in phase 1 schools. While this carries negative connotations, "pseudo-participation" is still valued by schools and communities, leading, for example, to improvements in school infrastructure.

If the central rationale for decentralisation is to increase the efficiency (and effectiveness) of education service delivery, a more extractive approach to community participation may endure. Based on Barnett's (2013) analysis of community involvement in Malawi, this would be categorised as the "financing" mode of community involvement, which was also the measure most closely associated with a positive effect on pupils' grade six maths and reading scores.

The empirical work across the case study schools echoes other research which highlights how the nature and extent of participation is mediated by education levels within the community (Blimpo and Evans 2011; Beasley and Huillery 2016). Some teachers and district education officials suggested that a community's level of education determines

⁵⁷ Three Foundation Bodies are represented across the four case study schools: Muslim Association of Malawi, Catholic Church, and the Anglican Church.

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both the willingness and capacity for communities to engage actively in the development of school improvement plans.

Variation in community capacity links to concerns that decentralisation reform, including school-based management reforms, can exacerbate inequalities (see, for example, De Grauwe 2004). Communities that are confident in their roles and with the capacity to engage in setting priorities and working in partnership with school staff are able to take advantage of the opportunities offered through the PSIP with less functional school-communities potentially getting worse. Whilst this conclusion cannot be drawn conclusively from the findings across the four case study schools, there is suggestive evidence that this could pose a threat to the PSIP and could impact on education quality as construed in terms of collaboration and partnership between the school and its community (Bray 2001).

Linked to variation in a community's capacity to participate meaningfully in school improvement activities through the PSIP, evidence from the phase 1 schools concurs with other research suggesting that the provision of school grants and their management at a school level can displace community effort (Das et al. 2011). Rather than increase levels of participation and subsequent responsiveness and accountability of the school to the community, findings in this study suggest that the management of school grants can lead to increased suspicion and disengagement within the school-community. There was a clear distinction on this issue between the phase 1 and phase 4 schools whereby for phase 4 schools that were not managing the funds themselves, suspicion or displacement of effort were not evident.

While the literature discussed in Chapter 2 suggests that greater citizen participation will hold decentralised institutions more responsive and accountable (Crook and Manor 1998; Blair 2000), the evidence from the phase 1 schools indicates that suspicion and lack of trust over school grant management breaks down this relationship. Policy guidance on the PSIP stated that information on school budgets and actual grant use should be publicly displayed. The findings confirmed that while schools kept information on school budgets and grant use, it was not *publicly* displayed and there was an indication that even when such information is displayed or shared with the local community it may not be understood.

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As discussed in Chapter 2, Paul (1992) focuses on exit, voice and control as strategies for ensuring effective accountability. He argues that performance can improve by moving away from an exclusive reliance on ‘control’ mechanisms such as hierarchical monitoring and use of organizational incentives to a system that uses ‘exit’ and ‘voice’ mechanisms in conjunction with control.

The findings here suggest that the PSIP may enhance ‘control’ through the prescribed alignment of school improvement plans and budgets with national education priorities and the need for these documents to be approved by district offices prior to the release of grants. Despite this, however, the findings suggest that there is not always a shared understanding of the intended use of the school grant, particularly in terms of the community’s tendency to focus on “hardware” (infrastructure and maintenance) as opposed to a focus on training and support for more effective teachers (“software” issues).

Despite the PSIP budget guidelines that stipulate a breakdown including allocations to teaching and learning materials, improved teaching and learning, repairs and routine maintenance (see section 6.2.3), evidence from the Government of Malawi evaluation of PSIP confirms that the school grants were used mainly for maintenance and less for the hiring of contract teachers and professional development support for teachers (Appendix 9.11).

Through the PSIP, parents and community members have the opportunity for increased ‘voice’ in terms of decision-making and planning for school improvement, both to ensure that resources are allocated on agreed priorities as well as checking that resources are used for their intended purposes. As discussed above, the case studies suggest that communities tend to be quietly suspicious about the use of the school grants rather than voicing their concerns and challenging those that directly manage the resources. There were, however, examples cited of communities reporting a misuse of funds to the police while some also suggested that communities had successfully put pressure on districts authorities to take action on reports of poor teacher behaviour.

While ‘exit’ in terms of transferring a child from one school to another is seldom an option for parents in rural Malawi given the associated costs (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.3), ‘exit’ in terms of non-payment of parental contributions to schools or non-attendance at parental meetings was evident across all four schools. However, rather than creating an

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accountability pressure, exit as non-participation weakens the accountability relations and increases the mistrust and suspicion associated with grant use.

Despite the structures put in place by the PSIP, including school improvement plans and budgets that should be in line with centrally defined policy objectives, the findings suggest that the accountability structure is weak. Drawing on the principal-agent framework, schools and communities have more information about what they are doing and make decisions in line with their own interests (Bossert 1998). One explanation for the weak accountability structures could relate to the multiple principals that influence the behaviour of teachers, from the head teacher to local politicians and Traditional Authorities. Unless incentives are aligned across multiple actors, there is significant scope for dilution and misalignment (Besley and Ghatak 2003).

I have discussed how the PSIP affects levels of community participation in schools and accountability between schools and the communities they serve as well as considering some of the reasons that lie behind the variation in what was observed both here and in the previous chapter. Before I turn to the relationship with education quality, I consider further explanatory factors linked to context, the enabling environment and policy implementation.

The findings shed light on the extent to which local context mediates policy implementation. While each of the four case study schools displayed characteristics of a 'typical' rural Primary School in Malawi, each local context and the extent to which multiple factors are likely to mediate any policy reform make the link between policy reform and observed outcomes difficult to identify in a general sense.

Head teachers and community leaders are very much the frontline implementers or shapers of the PSIP or, to use Lipsky's language, 'street-level bureaucrats' (see Chapter 3, section 3.4.1 for further discussion). Furthermore, the potential disconnect between policy intent and actual implementation is likely to be greater when the intended policy (in this case a form of decentralisation) is designed to increase discretion at the local level. The findings in this chapter confirm both a disconnect and variation across schools.

One area of disconnect relates to the relationship between policy decisions and structures on the one hand and norms and behaviours on the other. The findings in this study echo previous work on decentralisation in Malawi by Davies et al. (2003). Norms and culture

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shape the ways in which schools and their communities interact with one another and with central government. Whilst the PSIP establishes a framework for meaningful interaction between communities and schools, communities' unmet expectations for allowances and the expectation that those managing the school grants are likely to benefit themselves through corruption, reduces the likelihood that policy objectives will be met.

In one of the case study schools, communities were reluctant to participate in school planning meetings unless paid. Across both phase 1 schools, communities were suspicious of how the grants were being managed. Not unsurprisingly, the structural changes introduced through the PSIP do not lead to immediate changes in the culture of communities and how they interact with services provided by the state (see Fullan 1993).

A second area of disconnect is around an understanding of education quality. While the findings suggest areas of common ground both with regard to the purpose of education as a means towards a better life and in recognising the importance of the role of teachers and head teachers to improve quality, there was evidence of tension between community members, school staff and district staff in terms of how to allocate resources to improve quality. There is also a question around what scope the PSIP offers to drive substantial change to education quality, if, as participants suggest, teachers and head teachers are central to such change and yet remain within the control of government in terms of recruitment, training, deployment and payment.

This could also explain why there is therefore a tendency for these same communities to direct the use of the school grants towards tangible infrastructure rather than intangible but perhaps more quality-enhancing initiatives such as hiring contract teachers as teaching assistants and support for the continued professional development of teachers. Evidence from the case study schools and the Government's own evaluation suggests that hiring contract teachers was never a priority (Government of Malawi 2013b). An estimated seven per cent of total school grant spending was used to hire contract teachers in the first year of the roll out (2010/11) reducing to just under three per cent two years later (2012/13) (Government of Malawi 2013b). As the literature in Chapter 2 suggests, schools that invest more heavily in materials see limited improvements in learning outcomes (Chapter 2, section 2.1.3), as opposed to schools that invest in improved management and teacher productivity (Carneiro et al. 2015).

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Local education officials (school and district staff) share an understanding of education quality with an emphasis on inputs, although with a greater recognition of the nature of the relationship between the school and its community. Policymakers, on the other hand, maintain their attention on the measurable outputs of education quality, including reading skills and grade level benchmarks, without presenting views on ‘what works’ to develop these skills and achieve the benchmarks.

The number of children selected to go to secondary school is the main criterion for parents, community representatives and local education officials to judge the quality of a primary school. Policymakers, however, are more concerned with the acquisition of skills, even suggesting that passing exams does not necessarily denote that a student has acquired the skills that young people may need for their future education and employment. This position chimes with the broader international discourse (Chapter 2, section 2.1.2) and its concern that too many children are in school but not learning (Pritchett 2013). It is from this perspective that a discourse that equates education quality with the acquisition of measurable learning outcomes gains strength. It may also support a position that suggests the need for a minimum threshold of quality, including functional literacy and a mastery of basic mathematical operations (Bergmann 1996).

Improving the “quality and relevance” of education is one of the three core objectives in Malawi’s National Education Sector Plan (see Chapter 3, section 3.3.2). While the PSIP was designed to contribute towards its achievement, the concept of quality education itself is not defined within the sector plan. Although the PSIP guidelines stipulated that school improvement plans and budgets are aligned with the central government strategy, the mechanisms to enforce this appear to be weak. The “quality” objective within central government’s strategy was insufficiently defined to ensure alignment between the different perspectives on education quality at different levels and perhaps such a technical approach is also insufficient to drive the necessary changes in norms and behaviours.

Communities’ identification of priorities and the allocation of resources to deliver contextually relevant school improvement is central to the rationale behind decentralisation reform as cited in the literature (Colletta and Perkins 1995; Francis and James 2003; Mehrotra 2005). However, with no clearly defined and communicated concept of education quality and understanding of what works best to improve it, school-

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based changes may well not deliver the national-level changes envisaged by policymakers. Here, perhaps, lies a core tension of decentralisation.

The PSIP creates the structures to enable communities and schools to work together towards improved education quality, including a framework (through school improvement plans and budgets) to align school-level decision making with centrally determined objectives. Two key factors appear to limit the potential impact of the PSIP on education quality as defined in terms of learning outcomes.

First, the PSIP is being implemented within a political system that seeks to centralise power (Chapter 4), and characterised by clientelism or, more commonly, neopatrimonialism (Van de Walle 2001). These characteristics, dominant within the power dynamics of central government, affect behaviours, incentives and systems of accountability at the community level, weakening incentive structures and a breakdown in the principal-agent framework (Besley and Ghatak 2003).

Second, there has been insufficient attention paid to the multidimensional nature of education quality. Despite the PSIP guidelines provided to schools and communities, understandings of education quality continue to vary. Resources will not be directed towards the most effective strategies to ensure that all primary school students achieve a “minimum threshold” unless this is made an explicit objective which is popularised and understood within communities, alongside a menu of strategies for how it can be achieved.

6.4. CONCLUSION

The Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), a form of school-based management reform, is designed to support schools and communities to develop school improvement plans and manage school improvement grants as a means to enhance and improve decentralisation in Malawi and ultimately to impact on education quality.

Evidence from four case study schools at different stages of PSIP implementation demonstrates the opportunity that this programme provides for increased community participation and the allocation of resources in line with locally-identified school improvement priorities. And yet the responses to the PSIP by head teachers, school staff, community leaders and local education officials varies between schools. The variation across schools reflects, in part, the complexity of the broader political economy discussed in Chapter 4 and makes it more difficult than anticipated to draw a clear analytical distinction between the two pairs of schools at different stages of PSIP implementation.

Community members and school staff from the two phase 1 schools who are directly involved in the implementation of the PSIP report positive changes. These include the quick resolution of locally-identified problems and improving the collaboration and understanding between school staff and community members. Positive results included the increased availability of teacher and learning resources at the school and the improved quality and availability of school infrastructure. The PSIP provides evidence that school-based management reform can improve the efficiency and responsiveness of education service delivery. These same community members would also argue that improvements in the availability of teaching and learning materials and the quality of school infrastructures are important facets of education quality itself.

For community members and some school staff more distant from the implementation of the PSIP, the structural changes made through the reform do not always translate into the intended behaviours and responses from communities. In these instances, the allocation of school grants and call for engagement have resulted in community members scaling back their engagement and increasing their levels of mistrust in how government resources are being managed locally. Rather than school-based management leading to a crowding-in of resources to support education (Chapter 2, section 2.2.5), the reverse

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happens. Improvements in education quality in these contexts occur in spite of rather than because of school-based management.

Across all four schools, the findings suggest that the role of the head teacher as well as the behavioural norms within the communities are decisive in determining the extent to which school-community collaboration is effective and can lead to identified improvements in education quality. For example, the head teacher is responsible for ensuring that the uses of school grant monies are reported on in a meaningful and transparent way to the community. This is a key determinant in building trust and confidence with community actors whose natural inclination is suspicion given the norms and behaviours of politicians and national leaders (see Chapter 4 for further discussion).

Community members' decisions on whether or not to contribute to school improvement efforts are also shaped by local norms. For example, in one of the phase 1 PSIP schools, there was an expectation that participation in school meetings should be paid for and therefore community members would not attend school-community meetings unless compensated to do so. In the same phase 1 school in the south of Malawi, where cultural practices diverted attention away from the value of education, community participation was harder to secure and progress on school improvement more difficult to make.

The findings have also enabled me to explore the inter-relationship between the PSIP and different perspectives on education quality and therefore the potential pitfalls of decentralisation reform that sets out to improve education quality without clearly defining what the expected changes are and how these can best be achieved.

If a decentralisation programme sets out to improve education quality in a context with often limited education levels within communities, there is a need to define what is meant by education quality together with a common understanding of what works to improve it. In this sense, the central government policymakers need to play a greater enabling role to ensure alignment and provide more scope for decentralisation to meet a set of centrally defined policy objectives.

Across the four case study schools, it was clear that different actors understand education quality differently and these competing perspectives reduce the overall potential impact of the reform. Central government policymakers focus on the acquisition of measurable and generic skills with limited reference to the teaching and learning process and context.

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Parents and community representatives as well as school and district staff, focus mainly on the quantity of inputs in terms of classroom blocks, teachers' accommodation and the number of teachers.

The findings in Chapter 4 showed that central government officials have a stated intent to set priorities and the national policy agenda in education whilst questioning the capacity of districts and schools to implement as instructed. The findings from Chapter 6 show that school officials and community representatives will make decisions and allocate resources in line with their own perceptions of education quality. For school-based management reform to be successful, the enabling role of central government needs to generate a common understanding of policy objectives, in this case a common understanding of education quality, and the range of strategies that can be deployed at a local level to improve it.

7. EDUCATION QUALITY AND DECENTRALISATION: DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This final chapter discusses and draws conclusions from the findings of the empirical investigation. The study has, as described in Chapter 3, sought to understand education quality, decentralisation and the relationship between them through both qualitative and quantitative methods in the context of Malawi. The benefits of a mixed methods approach of this kind were confirmed as the study progressed. The large and rapidly growing literature on ‘what works’ to improve indicators of education quality (Chapter 2, section 2.1.3) often falls short of deep contextual understanding that would better enable policymakers to respond to the critical factors that mediate the effectiveness of a reform in a particular context (Evans and Popova 2016). If the question is more about under what circumstances does an intervention work, understanding the *actual* circumstances becomes imperative, including, in this case, what is meant by decentralisation, by education quality and the context within which the two concepts relate to one another.

Qualitative interviews, focus group discussions and case study research produced detailed accounts of how people from different perspectives understand education quality and education decentralisation in Malawi. Through such accounts, the multi-dimensional and contextual meanings of both terms could be understood and the dynamic relationship between them explored. These accounts also provided the context within which I undertook a quantitative evaluation of a national-scale decentralisation reform (the Primary School Improvement Programme).

My research builds on and breaks down the line between the existing literatures on education quality and decentralisation. The findings carry implications for further research, policy and practice. Whilst caution is needed in terms of extrapolating the qualitative findings to imply more generally applicable policy implications, the Malawi context has many similarities to other Sub-Saharan African countries, suggesting that some lessons for policy can be drawn widely.

The first part of this concluding chapter draws upon my findings to develop theoretical explanations for the two-way relationship between education quality and decentralisation. In so doing it focuses on the study’s overall research question – the extent to which

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decentralisation affects primary education quality in Malawi and how – and makes explicit the contributions to knowledge through this thesis (introduced in Chapter 2, section 2.3.1). It explores further empirical insights into education decentralisation in Malawi (research sub-question 1) and education quality in the context of the Primary School Improvement Programme (research sub-question 3). Within these sections, the study's findings are related back to the theoretical themes and debates about education quality and decentralisation presented in Chapter 2.

Drawing upon these theoretical explanations and insights, the second part of the chapter considers the implications for policy and practice. In the light of what many describe as a 'learning crisis' (Chapter 1) and a rapidly increasing body of research aiming to identify 'what works' to improve learning outcomes (Chapter 2), the final section proposes implications for policy and further research.

7.1. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION QUALITY AND DECENTRALISATION

7.1.1. Understanding decentralisation

Support for decentralisation was an Africa-wide push in the 1990s (Chapter 2). With its first multi-party elections in 1994 and alongside the influence of the Washington Institutions, Malawi was ideally suited to catch the tide. The Local Government Act was passed in 1998, aiming, above all, to devolve administration and political authority to districts and to promote popular participation in the governance and development of districts (Government of Malawi 1998).

Achieving these aims through decentralisation has been a challenge in Malawi. There was a mismatch between policy intent as set out in the 1990s and the political realities of implementation (Chapter 4). Democratic decentralisation stalled in 2005, resulting in a decentralisation effort that was more deconcentration than devolution. Dual accountability and informal district structures resulted in a reliance on personalities rather than systems to drive effective district governance and the improvement of public services, including education (Chapter 4, section 4.1).

Frustrated by the resistance to devolution and weak implementation by central government, through the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP), international donors sought to bypass these challenges by targeting schools and communities directly. Whilst the international donor intent may have been to increase the impact of donor funding on education outcomes and strengthen donors' accountability to their taxpayers at home, the result may have weakened local accountability and governance structures in Malawi.

There may well be an alignment between donor intentions and individual citizens' desire to participate in local school improvement activities but on its own, this alignment does not address the broader collective action challenge and power imbalances that local communities face in Malawi (Cammack 2001). The international donor focus on school-based management reform risks contributing to continued centralised political control and a status quo that continues to confuse rather than align accountability structures (Bossert 1998; Besley and Ghatak 2003; Bruns et al. 2011).

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My findings also show that the behaviours and practice of elites are reflected in the behaviours at local community level. For example, the central government patronage networks are replicated in similar patronage and clientelist networks within local communities whereby communities expect payment and a sharing of any central government resources that are now being managed at the local level (Chapter 6).

School-based management reform, like the PSIP, operates within its context. While donors can attempt to bypass the problematic political economy, the effectiveness of the PSIP is shaped by the context within which it is implemented. This has important policy implications for the design of school-based management reform.

The decentralisation literature defines four principal modes of decentralisation (see Rondinelli et al. 1983 and McGinn and Welsh 1999 in Chapter 2), as well as defining school-based management reform (Leithwood and Menzies 1998; Caldwell 2005). The findings in this study demonstrate that there is no discrete phenomenon that can be defined as decentralisation in Malawi. It is a complicated process with contrasting pressures driven mainly by the need to create and sustain political power (Chapter 4); understanding decentralisation means engaging with and understanding this complexity.

There is limited discussion within the decentralisation literature (Chapter 2) that engages with the interaction and relationship between school-based management approaches and the broader programme of decentralisation within which such reform may be implemented. To understand education decentralisation, there is a need to consider this interaction alongside a deep contextual understanding of what is entailed in any specific piece of decentralisation reform and how it is implemented in practice.

My findings in Chapter 4 contextualise the introduction of the PSIP and shed light on the findings from the case study schools (Chapter 6). While the PSIP creates space for meaningful participation and improved accountability, the broader political economy has a substantial impact on the nature of school-community interactions. Community participation in school improvement activities is mediated by communities' understandings about whose responsibility it is to improve schools, whether the community will be compensated for its efforts as well as whether or not a Traditional Authority may 'force' a community to participate (Chapter 6). A school may hold detailed financial records on the use of the school grant but this information may not be publicly displayed or understood by illiterate members of the community.

Trust⁵⁸ plays an important role in determining the nature and effectiveness of school-community relations. Regardless of whether the school grants are managed with integrity, the findings show that in the communities receiving school grants through the PSIP, levels of trust are low. The explanation for the underlying suspicions appear to be the result of the reflected norms and behaviours of central government officials who are perceived to, and, based on the evidence from the Cashgate affair (Chapter 3), do embezzle public funds for private gain.

Contrary to the position argued in the 2004 World Development Report and in Bruns et al. (2011), short-route accountability (Chapter 2) does not operate in isolation from long-route accountability. The ineffectual political processes, bureaucracy and behaviours that underpin long-route accountability also impact on the effectiveness of accountability between citizens and schools (short-route accountability). With low levels of trust and often confused lines of accountability (for example, district education managers who report both to District Commissioners and to central government – see Chapter 4), patronage and clientelist networks contribute to a breakdown in the principal-agent framework that relies on aligned incentives and accountability to function.

7.1.2. Understanding education quality

There is variation in how people from different perspectives understand education quality in Malawi (Chapter 6). Parents, community members and teachers are more likely to understand education quality in terms of quantity; the indicators used tend to be tangible and often visible, for example the numbers of classrooms in a school, the availability of teaching materials or the numbers of students passing exams. Policymakers, on the other hand, are more concerned with the more abstract idea of acquiring skills, including whether or not students can read, write or do basic maths. These contrasting perspectives lead to differences in ideas on how best to improve education quality, including through the use of school grants. Put simply, communities tend to focus on the ‘hardware’ (e.g. construction and materials) while more senior district and central government officials as well as representatives of international donors draw attention to ‘software’ issues (e.g. teacher training and parental support for learning).

⁵⁸ Trust here can be understood in terms of an expectation of reliability or good behaviour by another.

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Despite these different perspectives, there is common ground with regard to the purpose of education as a means towards “a better life”. What constitutes “a better life” is, of course, likely to vary across both context and time, reflecting variations in socio-economic, political, historical and cultural context (Hirst and Peters 1970). I would therefore argue the need to develop understandings of education quality that enable its purpose to be achieved rather than to be concerned about reifying the practice of education through attempts to define education quality (Sayed 1997).

The theoretical debates surrounding education quality (Chapter 2) should not distract attention away from the reality that over 60 million children around the world remain out of primary school with even more of those in school learning very little (Chapter 1). Driven mainly from a policymaker perspective, the findings support my argument that there are foundation skills that should be acquired through primary education as a necessary condition of education quality (Chapter 2, section 2.1.4). This echoes the case made for a minimum threshold of basic learning needs with more universal application (Bergmann 1996). Furthermore, some of the findings suggest that a focus on basic reading, writing and mathematical skills is what constitutes elements of a minimum threshold.

Quantitative approaches to education quality have their limitations; there is a tendency within the literature (Chapter 2, section 2.1.1) to conflate the concept of *quality* with *quantity*. Public exam results may be the most readily available indicators of education quality in a context like Malawi and resonate too with parental perceptions and yet there are challenges with these if interpreted as valid and reliable measures of levels of learning achievement over time (Chapter 5). The disconnect between public exams and measures of learning is revealed in the consistently high pass rates achieved in Malawi at the Primary School Leaving Certificate Exam contrasted with the low levels of learning reported in standardised assessments, such as Malawi’s performance in the Southern and East African Consortium Measuring Education Quality (SACMEQ) (Chapter 3).

Whether or not an understanding of education quality is made explicit by those involved in the delivery of education (from central government officials to teachers, parents and students), the concept will always be defined in day-to-day practice. Understandings of education quality inform the decisions that teachers take in the classroom and that parents

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make when participating in a prioritisation exercise to decide how to allocate school grant resources.

The Government of Malawi makes an explicit reference to ‘quality’ in its National Education Sector Plan (NESP) with ‘quality and relevance’ as one of the three education sector priorities (Government of Malawi 2008a). Two years into the strategy’s implementation, the Government introduced the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) as a central part of its strategy to achieve the objectives set out in the NESP, including to improve education quality. While the concept of quality within the plan is not defined, the Government provided training and guidelines as part of the implementation of the PSIP in an attempt to align central Government’s strategy with school-level implementation.

In line with central guidance, schools and communities were expected to develop school improvement plans and allocate school grants in order to improve education quality. While the guidance suggested activities, including improving the delivery of the curriculum, and budget caps for the allocation of school grants (Chapter 3, section 3.3.4), my findings reveal that these guidelines did not translate into schools and communities having a clear understanding of what education quality is nor a common understanding of what the most effective strategies might be to improve education quality (Chapter 6).

My findings in Chapter 5 show that the PSIP ‘works’ to improve the Primary Leaving Exam pass rates, to reduce school dropout and increase the availability of pit latrines for female students. I cannot, however, say whether these are the indicators of education quality and relevance envisioned by the Government of Malawi. The findings also show that the PSIP, in some circumstances, facilitates increased levels of community participation, the identification and resolution of school-based challenges but also causes tension and suspicion on account of the local management of resources (Chapter 6). Despite the evidence of some impact of the PSIP on indicators of education quality (Chapters 5 and 6), I do not know whether there was any effect on children’s acquisition of foundation skills, for example in basic reading and maths.

Whilst Malawi’s top-down sector strategy provides broad thematic objectives (e.g. quality and relevance), and through the implementation of the PSIP, some guidance on how schools should plan to improve education quality, a gap remains in terms of a common understanding. A lack of public and accessible information about education

quality contributes to the invisible problem of quality. There is indeed a challenge of ensuring coherence around the more complex notion of education quality as opposed to the simpler and more readily measurable idea of enrolment or attendance at school (see Chimombo 2005; Alexander 2015; Pritchett 2015).

‘To avoid working largely in the dark’ (Hawes and Stephens 1990:8) and to know whether or not public policy affects changes in education quality, an approach to education quality needs to be commonly understood. My findings imply that in a context like Malawi where there is consensus around the purpose of education as a means towards “a better life”, the approach should start with an articulation of what constitutes a minimum and universal threshold of basic learning needs. Beyond this, there should also be scope for variation according to the different cultural and socio-economic contexts across Malawi.

7.1.3. The relationship between education quality and decentralisation

Put simply, my findings show that if the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) is understood as a measure for decentralisation, then decentralisation in Malawi works to improve indicators of education quality. This is a valuable addition to the ‘what works’ literature but importantly, this thesis takes us much deeper into the relationship. Through the case studies in four schools, my findings show that through the PSIP process of developing school improvement plans and allocating school grants in line with an objective to improve education quality, schools and communities define and shape local understandings of education quality.

In the absence of a clearly articulated approach to understanding education quality, school-based management reform through the PSIP in Malawi has opened up the scope to define quality in different ways. This could be interpreted as the objective of education decentralisation whereby schools and communities are in a position to devise locally-appropriate and varied strategies to improve education in line with community needs and aspirations (Chapter 2, section 2.1.1). However, with no commonly understood definition of education quality, there is a lack of focus in terms of the desired outcomes of any decentralisation effort.

My findings show that even within communities there are divergent views on how school grants should be allocated in order to maximise the impact on education quality (Chapter

6). In line with the empirical literature on the relationship between decentralisation and indicators of education quality as well as the findings in Chapter 6, poorer communities often lose out on the benefits of decentralisation (Chapter 2, section 2.2.7). This suggests that leaving open the scope to define education quality in different ways at the local level is likely to penalise the poorest communities the most.

For the PSIP to maximise its impact on education quality, there is a need for greater coherence and a common understanding of what is meant by education quality. A top-down articulation of education quality may appear to run contrary to the ideas of decentralisation that seek to facilitate the local identification of needs, priorities and solutions. However, it builds on the literature that suggests the importance of an enabling central government as a facilitator of improved decentralised service delivery (Colletta and Perkins 1995; Tendler 1997; De Grauwe et al. 2005) and could enable government to counter the inequities associated with decentralisation by ensuring minimum thresholds of learning are met.

My findings support the case for providing public information on education quality, what it means to central government, how it is measured and strategies to improve it. As well as an effort to shift the norms and behaviours on education, this information could align incentives within the principal-agent framework (from central government down to the school and community and back up) and enable the education system to be coherent around a commonly understood goal and a set of strategies to achieve it. See Tendler's (1997) study on health workers in Brazil and the use of public information campaigns led by central government (Chapter 2).

The theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter 2 on decentralisation and on education quality that considers their meaning and typology are separate. Whilst the empirical literature examines the effect of variations in decentralisation (including school-based reform) on indicators of education quality, it does not explore if the way in which education quality is understood may impact on the effectiveness of decentralisation reform that seeks to improve it.

My research implies that there is a two-way relationship between decentralisation and education quality. The findings show that the existence of different concepts of education quality is likely to affect the extent to which decentralisation (in the form of school-based management) could impact on education quality. If an education system seeks to improve

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education quality through decentralisation without an explicit articulation of what constitutes education quality and how it can be identified and measured, the accountability pressures to achieve it will be weak and the incentives misaligned. If communities are given the discretion to plan for school improvement and allocate resources in line with their own local definition of education quality, the existence of different conceptualisations will inevitably lead to a range of different outcomes. In the case of Malawi, communities' focus on education quality as inputs (school infrastructure and materials) is at odds with central policymakers' focus on learning outcomes; the impact of decentralisation on what I argued to be the ideal conceptualisation of education quality (Chapter 2, section 2.1.4) is therefore reduced.

In this regard, my research builds on the principal-agent literature (Chapter 2) and the emerging theoretical work on the need for education systems to be coherent for learning (Pritchett 2015). My findings suggest that developing a collective understanding of education quality is central to establishing coherence and aligned incentives within an education system.

A successful decentralisation programme should clearly define a basic minimum threshold of learning achievement expected across all schools and at different grades. Alongside this, central government should make available information on the range of possible strategies that can be used to reach these minimum thresholds as well as ensuring a common understanding of what the minimum thresholds are and why they are important. There may have been an exponential rise in research to identify 'what works' to improve learning outcomes (Chapter 2), but this evidence is not widely accessible, understood or used by communities that are asked to design and agree school improvement plans to improve the quality of education.

In contexts like Malawi, where many children do not complete their primary education and fail to acquire foundation literacy and numeracy skills, there should be little scope for communities to define education quality in divergent ways. Instead, the focus for any decentralisation programme, in contexts like Malawi, should be on improving the alignment of incentives and strengthening the accountability structures (see Chapter 2, section 2.2.4) in order to deliver foundational learning outcomes for all.

7.2. IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Over the past several decades, there have been great strides globally to get more children into primary school in some of the poorest countries in the world (Pritchett 2013; UNESCO 2016). When measured in terms of what children are learning whilst in school, progress on education quality has been less impressive. This has been analysed in detail in the first ever World Development Report to focus exclusively on education, *Learning to Realise Education's Promise* (World Bank 2018). The available data on children dropping out from primary school and the number of children who can do basic reading and maths after four years of primary school, suggest that there is indeed a crisis in education quality (UNESCO 2014). Malawi reflects this global trend.

International policy discourse, exemplified in the Sustainable Development Goal framework (UN General Assembly 2015), has encouraged both researchers and policy makers to equate education quality with a focus on measurable learning outcomes. My research implies that this is welcome but carries risks. It is needed given what the available evidence says about the levels of learning achievement amongst some of the poorest groups of children around the world and about the importance of children's learning achievement to enable people to live healthier, more productive and fulfilling lives (Hanushek and Woessmann 2008; Hawkes and Ugur 2012). Using the language from the principal-agent literature (Chapter 2, section 2.2.4), the risk is when there is a *misalignment* between the universally assumed importance of learning outcomes as the central focus of education quality and the multiple perspectives on how education quality is understood in practice in a context like Malawi.

This thesis makes a valuable contribution to knowledge by interrogating the concept of education quality and exploring its meaning from different perspectives. The increasing number of studies into 'what works' to improve education quality in terms of learning outcomes need more carefully to reflect on whether or not the understandings of education quality may impact on the effectiveness of the intervention under study. Efforts to ensure all children achieve at least a minimum threshold of basic learning needs are less likely to be achieved if parents, teachers, districts and central government officials continue to have different understandings of education quality and the strategies required to improve it.

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Discussion of the existing literature (Chapter 2) and on the analysis of the effect of the PSIP on education quality (Chapter 5) suggest scope for further research to develop indicators of education quality that focus more intentionally on the *quality* rather than the *quantity* of education. Such approaches could include further analysis and exploration of value added measures of student achievement and school quality in Sub-Saharan African contexts (Timmermans et al. 2011; Guarino et al. 2015; Muñoz-Chereau and Thomas 2016; Crawford 2017). There is also scope for more research, including the potential use of latent variable modelling, to develop measures that can reliably capture the multidimensional nature of education quality (Cronbach and Meehl 1955; Bartholomew et al. 2008). Latent variable modelling is already widely used in education, including in the development of the PISA tests by the OECD, but these efforts focus mainly on improving the measurement of learning or academic achievement rather than considering how a measure of education quality from a broader perspective might be operationalised. Governance and economic reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa since the 1990s and under the influence from donors, have put great store in the potential of decentralisation to improve the efficiency, responsiveness and ultimately the effectiveness of public service delivery, alongside broader devolution efforts and local governance reforms.

More recently, in education, there has been an increasing focus on decentralisation reform that targets the school-level as the main locus to drive education quality improvements. Many school-based management reforms have been introduced globally, including in Sub-Saharan Africa (Bruns et al. 2011; Carr-Hill et al 2015). There is a need for both policymakers and researchers to consider the scope for school-based management reform to drive improvements in education quality from different perspectives if the central government retains control over many of the significant inputs into the system, including the recruitment, deployment and payment of teachers.

Whilst there is a growing evidence base on the relationship between decentralisation and education quality, to which this study makes a contribution, the context and nature of the school-based management reform tends not to be explored in depth. For example, further research could consider the extent to which there is a tension between democratic decentralisation and devolution on the one hand, and the objective of improved service delivery through school-based reform on the other.

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This links to a further implication for both research and policy: the importance of understanding implementation. A programme evaluation that does not examine the difference between programme intent and actual implementation is likely to result in a misinterpretation of the findings whereby the assumption will be that the programme was implemented as intended. Whilst if the ‘average treatment effect’ is estimated, it must be based on observed outcomes and therefore reflect what must have been implemented, the researcher’s understanding of the actual mechanisms that led to the observed effect can only be understood if the details of actual implementation are explored. For policymakers, on the other hand, more careful consideration and design is needed in order for policies and programmes to turn into effective implementation (Fixsen et al. 2009).

Research into decentralisation that assumes implementation fidelity and that assumes decentralisation can be understood as a discrete concept that is not deeply affected by the political economy in which it is being implemented is unlikely to be helpful. There is already a large body of literature that considers the complexity of decentralisation reform (Chapter 2, section 2.2). My research builds on this literature and re-emphasises the importance of the need to consider carefully the social, political and economic context within which the reform is being implemented. At the same time, I have highlighted the importance of understanding the wider context within which a more narrowly defined school-based management reform is undertaken. Further in-depth, fieldwork-based research into school-based management is needed, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

There are four related implications for policymakers. First, the positive findings of the effectiveness of the PSIP on Primary Leaving Exam pass rates, school drop out and the availability of toilets for girls, suggests that, on average, the PSIP is having a positive impact on the educational experience of children in Malawi. My findings suggest a number of policy implications to develop the programme further. These could include efforts to establish mechanisms to incentivise effective implementation alongside the need to encourage more genuine community involvement and partnership, including through displaying and sharing information to community members about school priorities and the PSIP in a manner accessible to those with limited education themselves.

Second and related, there is a need to improve the reliability and validity of administrative data to enable more robust policy evaluation using indicators of education quality. Education Management Information Systems (EMIS) across Sub-Saharan Africa should

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be well placed to support Governments to make decisions based on data and to manage and evaluate reform. Many countries, including Malawi, relied on international donor support for the initial set up of EMIS and continue to rely on international donors to adapt and upgrade existing systems. An over-reliance on often expensive and inaccessible software (often as the result of international donor support) as well as inadequate attention paid to domestic investment in robust data systems means that improving administrative data is both essential and an uphill task.

Third, education systems should develop and articulate an understanding of education quality alongside measures used to track progress. Whilst there may be a need to define a minimum threshold of education quality in terms of learning outcomes in contexts like Malawi where too many children do not learn how to read and do basic mathematics after four years in school (UNESCO 2014), an understanding of why such a threshold is important and should be prioritised needs to be more widely understood by all those involved in education, from students and parents to employers and policymakers.

My research confirms that changing structures and process does not lead automatically to a change in behaviour, norms and culture (Fullan 1993; Bullock and Thomas 2002; Davies et al. 2003). Alongside policy initiatives designed to improve education quality, governments and their international partners need to invest in efforts to cultivate both an understanding of the multidimensional nature of education quality as well as the essential task of ensuring that all children reach at least minimum thresholds in learning. The household-based assessments of learning outcomes, developed initially in India and now implemented across fourteen countries, including in Sub-Saharan Africa, could provide a mechanism to foster a common understanding of education quality and promote dialogue on what it takes to improve it.⁵⁹

Fourth, policymakers in contexts like Malawi need to be wary of using public exams as a means to indicate changes to levels of learning over time. As discussed in Chapter 5, norm-referenced exams used first and foremost to manage transition into the limited places available at the next level of education are often unreliable or invalid measures of learning over time. Efforts should therefore be made to develop standardised assessments

⁵⁹ The PAL Network brings together fourteen countries working across three continents to assess the basic reading and numeracy competencies of all children, in their homes, through annual citizen-led assessments (<http://palnetwork.org/>).

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of learning which could be used to indicate the extent to which cohorts of students are meeting a set of agreed learning criteria, including against defined minimum thresholds.

An increasing number of countries have developed such assessments, including in Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, but too often these initiatives are driven by international donors and external support rather than led by the respective Ministries of Education. For example, whilst Uganda has one of the most long-standing standardised assessments of learning in Sub-Saharan Africa, the sample-based data collection, analysis and dissemination has relied on international donor finance since it was initiated over fifteen years ago. In light of the continued limited prioritisation that countries like Malawi are giving to the articulation of clear goals on learning that can be measured, the criticism that much of the international discourse on learning outcomes has been driven by the ‘global North’ is valid (Barrett et al. 2015:236).

With the Sustainable Development Goal focused on learning outcomes and with increasing international attention being paid to education through the launch in September 2016 of the UN’s Education Commission report on a “Learning Generation”⁶⁰, the first ever World Development Report on education and a new multilateral fund to support education in emergencies⁶¹, there is an opportunity to make progress on ensuring that the poorest children around the world do get to school and learn as a means to realise their potential.

This thesis has shown that decentralisation in the form of school-based management can contribute to changes in the way schools and communities work together towards improved education quality. Equally, it has shown that the way that schools and communities understand education quality will determine how effective those policies are likely to be. If decentralisation is to drive consistent improvements in education quality, there is a need to align an understanding of education quality through the education system that combines shifts in behaviours and incentives with the provision of additional support to poorer communities that might otherwise be left behind.

⁶⁰ Chaired by the UN Special Envoy for Education, Gordon Brown, the Education Commission launched its “Learning Generation” report with the aim of mobilising increased levels of financing for education and a focus on the need for education systems to prioritise a focus on learning - <http://educationcommission.org/>

⁶¹ *Education Cannot Wait* is a multilateral fund, set up in 2016, to finance education in humanitarian or protracted crisis contexts.

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9. APPENDICES

9.1. STUDIES ON SCHOOL-BASED DECISION-MAKING AND EDUCATION OUTCOMES

Country	Description	Relevant impact study
Gambia	<i>Whole School Development</i> – per capita school grants provided alongside training for head teachers, teachers and representatives of parents and students. School grants were controlled by the school management committees and could only be spent on teaching and learning activities.	Blimpo and Evans (2011)
Kenya	<i>Extra Teacher Programme</i> – school management committees in treatment schools were able to hire and monitor contract teachers. Additional training for SMC members was provided to a random sub-sample of treatment schools. The programme was subsequently scaled up to the national level. The scale-up was also evaluated.	Duflo et al. (2011); Bold et al. (2013)
Niger	<i>School Based Management pilot programme</i> – parent associations given complete control over the use of per capita grants with no restrictions placed on the use of the funds. Training provided to committee members prior to grant disbursement.	Beasley and Huillery (2016)
Uganda	<i>Evaluation of a participatory report card intervention</i> – programme to test the relative impact of two kinds of school report card, one standardised by the Ministry of Education and the other custom-designed through a participatory process with each school community. School management committees trained in both treatment groups.	Barr et al. (2012)
Madagascar	<i>AGEMAD</i> – a programme that specifies roles and responsibilities and introduces new monitoring tools at each level of the school management hierarchy.	Glewe and Maïga (2011); Lassibille et al. (2010)
Columbia	<i>Rural Education programme</i> – subnational government offices assess needs and choose educational interventions for rural communities. School are given the authority to implement and/or monitor their chosen educational intervention and provided with a “basket” of educational good and teacher training.	Rodriguez et al. 2010

El Salvador	<i>EDUCO</i> – a national programme established in 1991 to give communities autonomy over most educational decisions.	Jimenez and Sawada (1999); Jimenez and Sawada (2003); Sawada and Ragatz (2005)
Honduras	<i>PROHECO</i> – drawing on the EDUCO programme, schools are managed by parental councils with ability to hire, fire and pay teachers	Di Gropello and Marshall (2005)
Mexico	<i>Quality Schools Program (PEC)</i> – introduced in 2001 to increase community participation in school-based decision-making and increase the efficiency and effectiveness of schools. Participating schools were eligible for annual grants up to about \$5,000. Grant amount depends on the socioeconomic status and characteristics of the community and educational needs identified.	Bando (2010); Murnane et al. (2006); Skoufias and Shapiro (2006)
Mexico	<i>Support to School Management (AGE)</i> – a precursor to PEC, the programme provided small grants (\$500 to \$700 per year depending on school size) to parents’ associations which can use the funds for school improvement. Parent associations receive training and the use of funds is restricted and cannot be used for salaries.	Gertler et al. (2012)
Mexico	<i>Program to Strengthen and Invest Directly in Schools</i> – a spin-off of PEC, implemented by six Mexican states in 2008. Targeted schools received grants which could be spent on training, interventions for at-risk students, materials and infrastructure.	Santibanez et al. (2014)
Nicaragua	<i>Autonomous Schools Programme</i> – school management councils in which parents held the voting majority, had the ability to hire and fire teachers and the responsibility to maintain school infrastructure and academic quality.	King and Ozler (2005)
Indonesia	<i>School Based Management</i> – established in 2003, the programme grants principals, teachers and local community-based members with autonomy over academic operations of schools. Per capita grants accompanied this programme and could be used for locally identified priorities.	Pradhan et al (2011)
Philippines	<i>Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP)</i> – implemented from 2000 to 2006, the programme granted decision-making authority to school principals but not the broader community. Per capita cash grants were provided for maintenance and operating expenses. The programme included investments in infrastructure and textbooks as well as training for teachers and principals	Khattari et al. (2010); Yamauchi and Liu (2012)
Philippines	<i>School-Based Management</i> – prior to the implementation of TEEP, there was a law that granted principals autonomy over academic, administrative and financial affairs in their schools as well as the discretionary establishment of school management committees.	San Antonio (2008)

Philippines	<i>Basic Education Reform Agenda</i> – building on TEEP, the government mainstreamed school-based management, including support for new or existing school management committees, school improvement planning, and an increased level of resources managed and controlled at the school level.	World Bank (2013); Yamauchi (2014)
Sri Lanka	Programme for School Improvement – designed to increase involvement of the school community in the management of the school, emphasising school improvement planning, efficient utilisation of resources, and improved cooperation between schools and communities in order to enhance the quality of (co)-curricular activities. A school report card programme was implemented simultaneously to inform the school community of the school’s performance.	World Bank (2011)

Adapted from a systematic review on the effects of school-based decision making on educational outcomes in low and middle-income contexts (Carr-Hill et al. 2015). Full references included in the main reference list.

9.2. RESEARCH TRAINING GUIDE (AN EXTRACT)

This is an extract from the research training guide that I developed and used prior to the start of the fieldwork, setting out the plans and preparation for the qualitative research. The guide started with an introduction to the research questions and background in order that the Research Assistant could better understand my approach.

The extract here includes only the fieldwork plan, the Research Assistant Terms of Reference, and the training guide itself, including the background to the research questions and considerations for qualitative research. The full training guide also included the consent form and the complete set of Topic Guides. Following the initial training session, the guide was used as a reference point for the fieldwork and to support the work of the research assistant.

1. Fieldwork plan

Date	Activity	Who
December 2012	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prepare topic guides & Fieldwork plan 2. Ethical and risk assessment 3. Translate topic guides 4. Set up interviews and seek approval from MoEST 5. Preliminary selection of case study schools 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. EB 2. EB 3. EB-RA 4. EB 5. EB
January 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel to Malawi for fieldwork #1 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Train research assistant b. Pilot Guide 1.1 c. Revise instruments d. Conduct interviews e. Reflect on progress, topic guide revision 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. EB-RA b. EB c. EB-RA d. EB e. EB-RA
February 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transcribe and translate fieldwork #1 interviews <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Transcribe interviews b. Translate stage 2 topic guides 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. EB-RA b. RA
March 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Pilot case study guide with 1 x head teacher, 1 x SMC, 1 x focus group with parents <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Feedback notes on pilot to EB b. Revise instruments 2. Set up and plan case study visits 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. RA b. EB-RA 2. RA
April – May 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Travel to Malawi for fieldwork #2 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Meet and reflect on progress and plans b. School visits #1 and #2 c. Reflect on progress d. School visits #3 and #4 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. EB-RA b. EB-RA c. EB-RA d. EB-RA
June 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Transcribe and translate fieldwork #2 <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 28 interviews on Guide 2 (PSIP/quality) b. 8 focus group discussions on Guide 2 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. RA b. RA
July 2013	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Validation of translation <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. 4 interviews & 1 focus group 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. RA

EB = Edward Barnett

RA = Research Assistant

2. Terms of Reference for the Research Assistant

Background

I am a PhD candidate at the London School of Economics. My research is looking at the extent to which decentralisation affects primary education quality in Malawi and how. I am using the Government of Malawi's Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP) as an indicator of decentralisation and I will be measuring quality in two ways. First by using quantitative indicators of quality from EMIS (e.g. school dropout, repetition, exam results and availability of latrines) and second through a qualitative exploration of people's understanding of education quality from central government to teachers and parents.

Scope

To support me in the collection of my qualitative data, I am looking to appoint a part-time research assistant. The research assistant will play a vital role in my research including translation, piloting, conducting interviews and focus groups in four case study sites, transcription of interviews and writing up field notes.

Activities

The research assistant will be expected to:

1. Participate in a 1.5-day training with me on the research topic, process of collecting data and ethical considerations
2. Translate the topic guides from English into Chichewa and contribute to their content
3. Plan, set up and make logistical arrangements for school site visits, including calls to the head teachers and informing the head teacher ahead of time who we will want to speak with on which days
4. Conduct interviews and focus groups (including pilots to test the instruments) in Chichewa at four school sites
5. Write-up field notes after each day, detailing how the process was conducted, how the interviewees engaged/responded, challenges and general comments
6. Transcribe and translate all interviews and focus groups
7. Produce a report at the end of the data collection process, summarising how the process was conducted, challenges and overall comments
8. Remain in close contact by email with me when I am back in the UK, including making me immediately aware of any changes in plan or challenges
9. Keep a detailed log of time spent on the research and any receipts for travel or other pre-approved expenditure

Outputs

1. 7 topic guides translated (~90% overlap between the guides)
2. Assist me in 12 interviews (to be led by me) on decentralisation and education quality in Lilongwe
3. 4 interviews from topic 1 transcribed (decentralisation and quality)
4. 3 case study topic guides piloted, report on pilot produced and shared with me by email
5. Topic 2 revised in collaboration with me and based on pilot experience
6. 28 interviews and 8 focus groups completed in 4 school sites in 4 different districts as agreed with me
7. 28 interviews from topic 2 transcribed and translated
8. 8 focus groups transcribed and translated
9. Daily fieldwork reports (max 2 pages) collated and summarised in an overall fieldwork report (max 10 pages)

NB. Details on payment schedule not included here.

3. Research Training Guide

Welcome to the research training. This is a brief overview of the research and the methods we will be using. I know you have experience of research, so I am looking forward to hearing your suggestions and comments.

a. Background: research questions

Research topic: education decentralisation and primary education quality in Malawi. The overall research question is “to what extent does decentralisation affect primary education quality in Malawi and how?”

Discussion point: *What do you understand by the terms “decentralisation” and “quality” education?*

Key words for discussion: *delegation, devolution, deconcentration, school-based management, quantitative, qualitative*

The concepts of *decentralisation* and of *quality* in education can be understood in many different ways. This research question has been chosen because at the moment there is no research that tries to combine different perspectives on education quality into one study (in sub-Saharan Africa). In Malawi, there is also little understanding and evidence about the current nature of education decentralisation.

We know that since 2010/11, the Malawi government is implementing the Primary School Improvement Programme (PSIP). Within PSIP, School Improvement Grants are disbursed into school bank accounts to enable schools and communities to plan and to budget and to carry out relatively small-scale improvement initiatives. This could be considered an element of education decentralisation. In this research, we want to understand how the PSIP fits within government plans and progress on education decentralisation and the reasons for these. As a sub-question to the overall research question, we want to explore “how education decentralisation is understood in Malawi and how PSIP fits within this?” In asking these questions, we should also be able to explore the status and progress of implementation with PSIP.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches can broadly define the two contrasting perspectives on education quality. From a quantitative perspective, quality education is considered in terms of measurable inputs (teachers, infrastructure, textbooks, buildings) and outputs (test scores, repetition, drop out). A qualitative perspective, on the other hand, is more concerned with processes, trying to discover what happens in the school and in

the classroom. Schools are places where pupils learn cognitive skills but also attitudes, cultural values and beliefs. Schools can be places where pupils may learn and become empowered to participate actively in society but they can also lead to exclusion and marginalisation from society.

In this research, we do not want to rely on one approach or one perspective on quality but instead explore quality from contrasting perspectives. I will be using quantitative measures of education quality (pass rates, repetition, drop out, availability of latrines) to assess the effect of the PSIP. Through the fieldwork, we want to explore individual's perspectives on education quality and understand how these may vary depending on whose perspective it is. A second issue to explore is "how primary education quality is understood in Malawi?"

By addressing understandings of decentralisation and of education quality we should then be in a position to provide a more in-depth and contextually relevant response to how education decentralisation may or may not affect primary education quality in Malawi.

Discussion points: *How might you expect decentralisation (including the PSIP) to affect primary education quality in Malawi? Why might we not expect to observe any effect of decentralisation on primary education quality?*

Key words for discussion: *participation, accountability, voice, trust, responsibility*

For the purpose of this research, we will use the PSIP as a measure of education decentralisation in Malawi. Similar to our approach to understanding education quality, we will also take a quantitative and qualitative approach to look at whether PSIP affects education quality. Using EMIS data, I will analyse whether we observe an effect of PSIP on quantitative measures of quality (as described above). Through the fieldwork, we aim to explore whether PSIP has an effect on education quality and how this comes about. For example, if we observe that schools with the PSIP appear to be better organised, have more motivated and committed teachers, stronger leadership and more community involvement we need to dig deeper and understand why this is the case? Does it relate to the PSIP in any way?

b. The fieldwork

The research will use data from a small scale qualitative study to try to address the main research question and sub-questions discussed above (*not included in this extract*). The fieldwork will be divided into two stages.

- Stage 1: Lilongwe-based: data collection on education decentralisation and perspectives of education quality from central government officials, district officials, civil society, and donors
- Stage 2: Field-based: data collection on perspectives of education quality and the effect of PSIP in four different school sites in four different districts. The design is to select one school from a district involved in phase 1 of PSIP (2010/11) and one school due to be included in phase 4 of PSIP (2013/14). These schools will both be in the Northern region of Malawi and will be as similar as possible in all characteristics except for being in two different districts. We will repeat this with a pair of schools in the Southern region.

Discussion point: Why might we want to select case study schools as similar as possible in all characteristics except for their participation in the PSIP?

Data collection techniques

We will use three main data collection tools:

1. **Semi-structured interviews:** these are backbone of the fieldwork. There are different interview guides for each group of informants. These will be discussed in detail and for stage two, translated.
2. **Focus Group Discussion:** these will be used for teachers and parents at the school sites. This will help provide a more conducive and supportive environment to allow people to express their views as well as to enable more perspectives to be heard in less time. We will consider whether to split female and male informants into separate groups.
3. **Non-formal observation:** it is important that we observe behaviour and body language whenever we are conducting our research. These observations count as data. We should both keep daily research notes based on what we observe. These may help provide clarification to things that are said in interviews as well as to suggest existing power dynamics and relationships within communities and between schools and their communities.

Ethics

Discussion point: *Do you see any ethical issues that we need to be aware of in this research? What do you think are the main power imbalances involved in this research? Do you perceive any risks to you as the research assistant?*

Key points for discussion: *informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, compensation, reflexivity*

Outputs, feedback and dissemination

The research will be used as the basis for my PhD thesis, and possibly academic journal articles and book chapters. I will also report (in the form of a written report) the research to the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) to inform future planning and decision-making on PSIP and related initiatives.

Discussion point: *Do you think we should feedback initial findings at each of the four sites following the fieldwork? If so, how do you think we can best do this?*

c. Useful reminders for qualitative research

- The research we are conducting is participatory and qualitative. There are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in views of senior officials as well as teachers, parents and community members. All opinions expressed are equally valid and it is important that each participant has the freedom to express their views without judgement from the researcher.

Discussion point: *In your experience, how can we avoid our judgement coming through as we conduct the research?*

- A clear introduction to the research, the informed consent process and being available for questions are all crucial to this being an ethical study.
- Semi-structured interviews are especially designed to let the participant lead the discussion to a significant degree. Pursue lines of particular interest to the participant, but don't let them stray so far off topic so as to waste valuable time.

- Always check back if you are unclear about what a response means – you can do this by reflecting, for example, “I see, that is very interesting, so can you tell me again what you think the purpose of education is?”
- Avoid repetition – if you think a topic has been covered in a participant’s response to an earlier question, skip the question on that topic.
- Make a note of any questions that participants find difficult to answer – rephrase it on the spot but remember to bring this up for discussion later as it may need to be changed.
- Allow participants sufficient time and mental space to answer questions – don’t hurry them or finish their sentences for them.

Fieldwork checklist

- ✓ Do the participants know we are coming, when and where we are meeting them?
- ✓ Do they understand the reason we have asked them to participate and the aims of the study, and have they signed the consent form?
- ✓ What are the practical arrangements? E.g. snacks, drinks
- ✓ What do we need? Paper, pens, recorder, spare batteries
- ✓ Have we arranged the interviews at times of day and at a location convenient to the participants?
- ✓ Is the tape recorder on?!

d. Tips for participatory research

- Practise sensitive listening – this includes paying attention to body language
- Be patient, gentle and ensure you treat the participant with respect
- Keep an open mind – don’t prejudge answers
- Practise careful recording skills – make notes of anything you think of as important
- Do all you can to get to know the research context in advance, and keep learning
- Avoid any complicated language, anything that may lead to misunderstanding or feelings of alienation
- Empathise – try to imagine what it might be like to be the participant and try to make them feel at ease

e. Research tools

We will now go through the interviews and focus group guides together. Before we do and before you start the translation work, here are some things for us to think about. Let's discuss examples of the following, based on your experience, and think about what we want to avoid or include in these research tools:

- Closed and open questions
- Leading questions
- Insensitive questions (e.g. culturally or personally insensitive)
- Ambiguous questions
- Sudden changes of topic or bad sequencing
- Overcrowded questions – too many statements per question
- Concepts or words that translate badly, or not at all – both literally and culturally

f. Possible challenges

Please add to this as we go along through the research as we encounter new problems and find new solutions.

Problem	Suggested solution
The participant is shy and finds it hard to respond	Try to make them feel at ease, remain patient. Make it clear that we are not judging them, we are just interested in their views to help us with our research.
The participant appears to be giving answers based on what they think the researcher wants to hear	Listen to these views and try to triangulate what they say with what others have said and if there is a difference, seek to discover why
Participants wanting financial compensation	Be clear on the purpose of the study and who the researchers are (i.e. independent, not from an NGO or donor). An approval letter from MoEST will also be important and help to guard against this issue.
People may not be available at the agreed time (e.g. funeral obligations)	Be patient and flexible with the schedule and try to fit around local commitments.

9.3. CONSENT FORM

Research into Decentralisation and Education Quality

You are invited to participate in a research study about the relationship between primary education quality and decentralisation in Malawi. I have selected you because I am interested to hear your opinions about education quality and about what goes on in your school / zone / district. I am asking you to read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Ed Barnett, Department of Social Policy at the London School of Economics (UK) and assisted by Research Assistant.

Background information

The aim of the research is to look at the relationship between decentralisation and primary education quality in Malawi. I will be asking you about your ideas on education quality and about teaching and learning, planning, financial support and community involvement in your school/zone/district. The information collected during my research will be analysed by the lead researcher (Ed Barnett) and form part of his final PhD thesis. It is possible that some of the information may be used in published academic journals and/or book chapters.

Data Collection

I plan to conduct interviews and focus group discussions at five levels: central, district, zone, school and community.

Level	Interviewees
Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Government officials from the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, the National Local Government Financing Committee. ▪ Representative(s) of civil society ▪ Representative(s) from development partners
District	District Commissioner, District Education Manager
Zone	Primary Education Adviser
School	Head teacher, deputy head teacher, teachers
Community	PTA, SMC, parents, Village/Area Development Committee chair

Your participation

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things: I will ask you to talk with me for one or two hours about education quality and on different aspects of your school/zone/district. I will also ask you if I may record our conversation. I do this so that we can remember exactly what is said in the interviews to help with the analysis of the information. The recordings will not be used for any other purpose other than this research. The only people to hear the recordings will be the research team (Ed Barnett and Research Assistant). I may also ask to see and make copies of some documentation,

including the School Improvement Plan, minutes of meetings, the school log book, any financial information (including budget, receipts, reports).

There is no direct benefit to you as an individual in terms of your participation in the research; however, the research may give you a chance to talk about education quality and the strengths and weaknesses of your school. It is hoped that the findings of this research will inform future planning and decision-making within the Government of Malawi. You will not be paid anything for the time you will be participating in this study.

Declaration on disclosure and informed consent:

1. We will ensure confidentiality and anonymity of all the information gathered.
2. In the final thesis and in any sort of report or publication, we will not use the name of any person or refer to his/her position in the institution (school, community, zone, district) in any publicly available document.
3. All the information will be treated with the strictest confidentiality and what you say will not be passed to anyone else in a way that will identify you.
4. With your consent, publications may be produced as a result of this but you will not be named or identified.
5. Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from participation in my research at any time.

Please feel free to ask any questions about this research either now or at a later stage. My contact details are as follows: *not shown here*.

Declaration

I am happy to take part in this research and have read and understood the contents of this consent form, including the declaration on disclosure and informed consent.

Please print your name, sign and date below.

Name: _____

Institution: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of researcher: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

9.4. LIST OF PARTICIPANTS FOR LILONGWE-BASED FIELDWORK**Semi-structured interviews**

	Type of institution	Reference in Findings
1	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, male
2	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, male
3	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, female
4	Ministry of Local Government	Central Government Official, male
5	Ministry of Local Government	Central Government Official, male
6	District Commissioner	District Government Official, female
7	Primary Education Adviser	District Government Official, male
8	District Education Manager	District Government Official, male
9	International donor agency	Donor Agency, female
10	International donor agency	Donor Agency, female
11	International donor agency	Donor Agency, male
12	NGO	Civil Society Representative, male
13	NGO	Civil Society Representative, male
14	NGO	Civil Society Representative, male

Informal discussion

	Type of institution	Reference in Findings
1	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, male
2	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, male
3	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, female
4	Ministry of Education	Central Government Official, female
5	International donor agency	Donor Agency, male
6	International donor agency	Donor Agency, male
7	NGO	Civil Society Representative, female

9.5. TOPIC GUIDE (EDUCATION DECENTRALISATION AND EDUCATION QUALITY)

A. Background

1. Can you give me a brief bio in terms of your name, your current role and a very brief overview of previous roles you have worked in.

B. Education decentralisation in Malawi

1. I am interested in understanding the **motivation and rationale** for education decentralisation in Malawi. Feel free to situate this in the context of wider decentralisation reform. So the question is, in your opinion, why is education decentralisation taking place in Malawi? *[What's the history? Is it politically or policy focused? Who's initiative was it in the first place? Does it reflect or is it in any way different to decentralisation in other sectors?]*
2. What did you expect to come from decentralisation in education?
 - a. Is there a difference between your expectations and what is actually happening?
 - b. Why might this be the case? What are the challenges with decentralisation? *[including capacity constraints, mixed accountability e.g. DEM reports both to the District council and to MoEST, lack of democratic decentralisation]*
3. How decentralised do you think primary education is in Malawi?
 - a. Do you think there should be more or less decentralisation?
 - b. Have there been any changes made on decentralisation reform in the recent past?
4. Who are the key people involved in decentralisation reform in education? *[donors, NGOs, general public, have roles changed over time?]*

C. Primary School Improvement Programme

1. Do you know about the Primary School Improvement Programme? *[If not, explain with reference to Direct Support to Schools]*
 - a. In your opinion, how does PSIP relate to what we have just been talking about in terms of decentralisation? *[Is it part of the government's decentralisation reform? Please explain why or why not?]* What outcomes do you expect to see from the Primary School Improvement Programme?
 - b. How far has progress got with the Primary School Improvement Programme? *[with school/zone/district grant disbursement, with training of schools/communities, with monitoring and coordination]*

- c. According to the plan, School Improvement Grants should be disbursed in 24 districts in 2012/13. Do you know if this is on track?
 - d. Do you think PSIP is being implemented as intended? *[Is it on track, to plan? Do you think it's being implemented as intended? What are some of the successes/challenges?] Why, why not?*
2. Are there any other ongoing decentralisation initiatives in primary education?

I now want to turn to a different topic to explore what you think education is for and to understand your perspective on the idea of "quality" in primary education.

D. The purpose of education and its value

1. In your opinion, what do you think education is for? *[to get a job; to pass exam; to develop skills; to be healthy; to fulfil potential; to be happy; to be wealthy]*
 - a. Of the different ideas that you have mentioned, which do you think is the most important? Can you explain why you think this is the most important?
 - b. For you, is education a means to an end or an end in itself? *[suggest it may be a combination but try to understand the extent to which they value education as an end itself]*
2. To achieve the purpose of education as you have just stated, do you think it's better if the system is more or less decentralised? Please explain your answer.

E. Recognising quality (Ideal-type)

1. What do you see as the features or aspects of a good quality primary education? *[can you think of any more? If respondent is fairly silent, give 1 or 2 examples: classrooms;(good) teachers; relevant curriculum; (good)head teacher; teaching and learning materials; safe environment; children who can read, write and count; happy children; schools with high levels of parental involvement; nice new classrooms]*
 - a. Why are these features of good quality education?
 - b. Are some features more important than others? Why?

F. Recognising quality (Reality)

1. How much of what you have just talked about do you recognise in the typical rural school in Malawi?
 - a. What are the biggest challenges to good quality primary education in Malawi? Why? *[suggest the interviewee gives three priority issues]*
 - b. What can be done to improve the quality of primary education in Malawi? *[suggest the interviewee gives three priority issues]*

G. Change over time

1. Has the quality of primary education changed in Malawi over the past 3 years?
 - a. How?
 - b. Why do you think these changes have happened?

9.6. TOPIC GUIDE (HEAD TEACHER)

A. Background (complete the information form)

1. Ask the respondent to introduce themselves and ask whether s/he enjoys his/her job? Why/why not?

B. School Improvement Planning

1. Does the school have a School Improvement Plan?
 - a. If yes, what are the priorities in the plan? If not, what do you know about School Improvement Planning? (go to C)
 - b. How was the plan developed? [*Who was involved in its development? Whose priorities are reflected most?*]
 - c. Is it being implemented? How? [*Is there evidence of its implementation?*]
 - d. What is the progress with implementation?
 - e. Has the School Improvement Plan process been useful in your school? Please explain.
 - f. For how many years have you developed a School Improvement Plan?
2. Did you receive training in how to develop a School Improvement Plan?
 - a. If yes, when was the training and how long did it last?
 - b. What do you remember most about the training content?
 - c. Do you think it was helpful? Why/why not?

C. Teaching and Learning

3. Do you think teachers are motivated in their job? [*they're always on time; don't miss lessons; enthusiastic about teaching; never complain*] Why, why not?
4. What resources do teachers have to support their teaching?
 - a. How long has the school had these resources?
 - b. Where do the teaching and learning materials come from? [*from central Ministry? District? Purchased locally?*]
 - c. Have you had any challenges with teaching and learning materials over the last 3 years? Why, why not?

5. How is learner attendance in school? Is learner absenteeism a problem? *[is there a difference between girls and boys]*
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?
6. Do learners drop out of school? *[girls? standard 5 learners? older learners?]*
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?
7. Do learners repeat classes? *[is there a difference between girls and boys]*
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?

D. School Infrastructure

8. What is good about the school's infrastructure *[classrooms; desks; latrines; playground]?*
9. What is not good about the school's infrastructure?
10. Is there any change with the school's infrastructure in the last 3 years?

E. Participation

11. Who do you think owns the school? *[government, church, community, NGO]* Please explain.
 - a. Have feelings of ownership changed at all in the past 3 years?
12. Describe the involvement of parents or community members in the life of the school. How do they participate? *[contribute to building/maintenance, teacher welfare, volunteer teacher; attend school events, plan and monitor school improvement (including budget)]*
 - a. If they are involved, what facilitated this involvement? If not, why not?
 - b. Are there any positive elements of this involvement? Why are these positive?
 - c. Are there any negative elements of this involvement or lack of involvement? Explain

13. Does involvement from parents or community members have an effect on teachers? If yes, How? If not, why not?
14. What information is shared between the school and the community?
 - a. To what extent can the community or parents influence what is happening in the school?
15. Are parents / community members involved in children's learning? If yes, in what ways? *[talking to teachers about children's work; follow up on homework; check learners' books]*
16. Have levels of involvement of parents or community members changed at all in the last 3 years? Why / Why not?

F. Accountability

17. As the head teacher, to whom are you accountable (including all of the people you think you need to report to)?
 - a. Of the people you have just mentioned, who do you feel most accountable to?
 - b. What kinds of information do you have to report and to which people?
18. How is your performance as a head teacher evaluated?
 - a. Who has the power to recommend you for promotion?
 - b. If a head teacher, such as yourself, is underperforming, who is most likely to ask you to improve your performance?
19. Who reports to you as the head teacher?
20. Do you know if a teacher at your school is not doing a good job?
 - a. If yes, how? If no, why not?
 - b. What do you do if a teacher is not doing a good job?
21. When you receive complaints about the teachers from the parents, what do you do?
22. Would anything happen if learners do badly in the Primary School Leaving Exams or if they are perceived not to be learning well in school? *[explore accountability for results, learning?]*

G. Finance

23. Does your school have any money to spend this year? *[e.g. from a School Improvement Grant or from DSS or from fundraising or an NGO?]*
- a. How much? Where from? Who decides on how to spend the money? *[how are these decisions linked to the School Improvement Plan?]*
 - b. Where is the money kept? Who manages the money?
 - a. If in a bank, who are the signatories on the school bank account? How often do you go to withdraw money?
 - b. What is good or not good about keeping money in the bank account?
 - c. How much money has been spent this year? On what? Is there evidence? Are records kept / displayed?
 - d. Are teachers, community members all aware of how much money there is and how it will be spent / has been spent? *[e.g. was the budget/money discussed when the School Improvement Plan was developed?]* If yes, how are they made aware; if not why?
 - e. Do you report on money spent to the Primary Education Adviser and/or the District Education Manager? If yes, how often? If not, why not?
24. Who ensures that any money at the school is used for agreed purposes?
- a. How is this done?
 - b. Do you check on how money is spent? If yes, what do you check? If not, why not?
 - c. Is money always spent as planned? *[e.g. as planned in or related to SIP]*
25. Has anything changed in the last 3 years in terms of money you have to spend at your school? If yes, what?
- a. Are things better or worse than 3 years ago in terms of available funds at the school? Explain

H. The purpose of education and its value

26. In your opinion, what do you think education is for? There is no right or wrong answer. *[to get a job; to pass exam; to develop skills; to be healthy; to fulfil potential; to be happy; to be wealthy]*

I. Recognising quality (Ideal-type)

27. In your opinion, what are the features of a good quality primary education? *[classrooms;(good) teachers; relevant curriculum; (good)head teacher; teaching and learning materials; safe environment; children who can read, write and count; happy children, schools with high levels of parental involvement]*
- a. Why are these features of good quality education?
 - b. Are some features more important than others? Why?

J. Recognising quality (Reality)

28. In your opinion, which of these features are present in your school?
- a. What are the strongest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are important for quality education? *[qualified teachers; absent teachers; poor classrooms]*
 - b. What are the weakest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are weak? *[availability of books; regular homework; no desks; crowded classes; poverty]*
 - c. What are the biggest challenges to good quality education in your school?
 - d. What can be done to improve the quality of education in your school?

K. Change over time

29. Has the quality of education changed in your school over the past 3 years?
- a. How?
 - b. Why do you think these changes have happened?

9.7. TOPIC GUIDE (SMC CHAIR)

[This topic guide was translated into Chichewa]

A. Background (complete the information form)

1. Ask the respondent to introduce themselves and ask whether s/he enjoys his/her job as SMC/PTA chair? Why/why not?
2. How were you selected to be the SMC/PTA chair? Who approached you?
3. In your opinion, what is the role of the SMC/PTA?
4. Do you think the SMC/PTA is effective in carrying out its role? Why/why not?
5. How does the SMC work with the PTA?

B. School Improvement Planning

6. Do you know if the school has a School Improvement Plan?
 - a. If not, what do you know about School Improvement Planning? (go to C)
 - b. Were you and/or your committee involved in the School Improvement Planning process? If so, how? If not, why not?
 - c. What were the main priorities identified by the SMC and PTA? Was it easy or difficult to agree on priorities with the school?
 - d. Can you comment on the progress with implementation?
 - e. Do you think the School Improvement Plan process been useful in your school? Please explain.
7. Did you receive training in how to develop a School Improvement Plan?
 - a. If yes, when was the training and how long did it last?
 - b. What do you remember most about the training content?
 - c. Do you think it was helpful? Why/why not?

C. Teaching and Learning

8. Do you think the teachers at your school are doing a good job?
 - a. How do you know?

9. Do you think teachers are motivated in their job? *[they're always on time; don't miss lessons; enthusiastic about teaching; never complain]*
 - a. Why, why not?
10. How is learner attendance in school? Is learner absenteeism a problem? *[is there a difference between girls and boys]*
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?
11. Do learners drop out of school? *[girls? standard 5 learners? older learners?]*
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?

D. School Infrastructure

11. What is good about the school's infrastructure *[classrooms; desks; latrines; playground]?*
12. What is not good about the school's infrastructure?
13. Is there any change with the school's infrastructure in the last 3 years?

E. Participation

14. Who do you think owns the school? *[government, church, community, SMC, NGO]*
Please explain.
 - a. Have feelings of ownership changed at all in the past 3 years?
15. Describe the involvement of parents or community members in the life of the school. How do they participate? *[contribute to building/maintenance, teacher welfare, volunteer teacher; attend school events, plan and monitor school improvement (including budget)]*
 - a. If they are involved, what facilitated this involvement? If not, why not?
16. Do you think involvement from parents or community members has an effect on teachers? If yes, How? If not, why not?
17. What information is shared between the school and the community?

- a. To what extent can the community or parents influence what is happening in the school?

18. Are parents / community members involved in children's learning? If yes, in what ways? *[talking to teachers about children's work; follow up on homework; check learners' books]*

19. Have levels of involvement of parents or community members changed at all in the last 3 years? Why / Why not?

F. Accountability

20. As the SMC / PTA chair, to whom are you accountable (including all of the people you think you need to report to)?

- a. What kinds of information do you have to report and to which people?

21. How is your performance as an SMC / PTA chair evaluated?

22. As the SMC/PTA chair, who should be reporting to you?

- a. How often do they report to you? With what information and in what form?

23. Do you know if a teacher or the head teacher at your school is not doing a good job?

- a. If yes, how? If no, why not?

- b. What do you do if a teacher or the head teacher is not doing a good job?

24. When you receive complaints about the teachers from the parents, what do you do?

25. Would anything happen if learners do badly in the Primary School Leaving Exams or if they are perceived not to be learning well in school? *[explore accountability for results, learning?]*

G. Finance

26. Does your school have any money to spend this year? *[e.g. from a School Improvement Grant or from DSS or from fundraising or an NGO?]*

- a. How much? Where from? Who decides on how to spend the money? *[how are these decisions linked to the School Improvement Plan?]*

- b. Where is the money kept? Who manages the money?
 - a. If in a bank, what is good or not good about keeping money in the bank account?
- c. How much money has been spent this year? On what? Is there evidence? Are records kept / displayed?
- d. Are teachers, community members all aware of how much money there is and how it will be spent / has been spent? *[e.g. was the budget/money discussed when the School Improvement Plan was developed?]* If yes, how are they made aware; if not why?

27. Who ensures that any money at the school is used for agreed purposes?

- a. How is this done?
- b. Is money always spent as planned? *[e.g. as planned in or related to SIP]*

28. Has anything changed in the last 3 years in terms of money you have to spend at your school? If yes, what?

- a. Are things better or worse than 3 years ago in terms of available funds at the school?

H. The purpose of education and its value

29. In your opinion, what do you think education is for? There is no right or wrong answer. *[to get a job; to pass exam; to develop skills; to be healthy; to fulfil potential; to be happy; to be wealthy]*

I. Recognising quality (Ideal-type)

30. In your opinion, what are the features of a good quality primary education? *[classrooms;(good) teachers; relevant curriculum; (good)head teacher; teaching and learning materials; safe environment; children who can read, write and count; happy children, schools with high levels of parental involvement]*

- a. Why are these features of good quality education?
- b. Are some features more important than others? Why?

J. Recognising quality (Reality)

31. In your opinion, which of these features are present in your school?

- a. What are the strongest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are important for quality education?
[qualified teachers; absent teachers; poor classrooms]
- b. What are the weakest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are weak? *[availability of books; regular homework; no desks; crowded classes; poverty]*
- c. What are the biggest challenges to good quality education in your school?
- d. What can be done to improve the quality of education in your school?

K. Change over time

32. Has the quality of education changed in your school over the past 3 years?
 - a. How?
 - b. Why do you think these changes have happened?

9.8. TOPIC GUIDE (FOCUS GROUP PARENTS)

[This topic guide was translated into Chichewa]

A. Introductions, including ice-breaker (activity to get participants thinking about the topic)

Each participant will complete a brief questionnaire with background information: name, sex, age, residence, ethnicity, religion, highest level of schooling achieved, job, number of children (of what age, attending which school(s)), some questions on involvement in SMC/PTA/school planning

B. School Improvement Planning

1. What do you think are the key priorities to improve your school?
2. Do you know what a School Improvement Plan is?
 - a. If yes, can you describe the School Improvement Planning process?
 - b. Were parents involved in the process? How?
 - c. Who are the most important people in the SIP process?
3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the SIP process?

C. Teaching and Learning

4. Do you think teachers are motivated in their job? How do you know?
5. Do learners drop out of school? [*girls? standard 5 learners? older learners?*]
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?
6. Is learner absenteeism a problem?
 - a. Why/why not?
 - b. Has this changed over the last 3 years?

D. Participation

7. How would you describe the relations between the school and the community?

8. Describe the involvement of parents or community members in the life of the school. How do you participate? *[contribute to building/maintenance, teacher welfare, volunteer teacher; attend school events, plan and monitor school improvement (including budget)]*
 - a. Are parents / community members involved in children's learning? If yes, in what ways? *[talking to teachers about children's work; follow up on homework]*
 - b. Have levels of involvement of parents or community members changed at all in the last 3 years? Why / Why not?

E. Accountability

9. Do you know if a teacher or the head teacher at your school is not doing a good job?
 - a. If yes, how? If no, why not?
 - b. What do you do if someone is not doing a good job?
 - c. If you complain to the head teacher or the PEA, is there usually a positive response? How quickly is the situation addressed?
10. What information is shared between the school and the community?
 - a. To what extent can the community or parents influence what is happening in the school?
11. What would you do if you knew that learners were doing badly in the Primary School Leaving Exams or if they are perceived not to be learning well in school? *[explore accountability for results, learning?]*

F. Finance

12. Does your school have any money to spend this year?
 - a. How much? Where from? Who decides on how to spend the money? *[how are these decisions linked to the School Improvement Plan?]*
 - b. Does the school and/or SMC/PTA report to parents/community on how much money there is and how much has been spent? If yes, how often and how? If not, why not?
13. Has anything changed in the last 3 years in terms of money you have to spend at your school? If yes, what?

14. Are things better or worse than 3 years ago in terms of available funds at the school? Explain

G. The purpose of education and its value

15. What do you think education is for? There is no right or wrong answer. *[to get a job; to pass exam; to develop skills; to be healthy; to fulfil potential; to be happy; to be wealthy]*

H. Recognising quality (Ideal-type)

16. In your opinion, what are the features of a good quality primary education? *[classrooms;(good) teachers; relevant curriculum; (good)head teacher; teaching and learning materials; safe environment; children who can read, write and count; happy children, schools with high levels of parental involvement]*

- a. Why are these features of good quality education?
- b. Are some features more important than others? Why?

I. Recognising quality (Reality)

17. In your opinion, which of these features are present in your school?
- a. What are the strongest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are important for quality education?
 - b. What are the weakest features of your school (including teaching and learning)? Why do you think these are weak? *[availability of books; regular homework; no desks; crowded classes; poverty]*
 - c. What are the biggest challenges to good quality education in your school?
 - d. What can be done to improve the quality of education in your school?

J. Change over time

18. Has the quality of education changed in your school over the past 3 years?
- a. How?
 - b. Why do you think these changes have happened?

9.9. NUMBER OF PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS BY YEAR AND PSIP PHASE

Year	2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
Total number of public schools	4,955	4,958	4,956	4,951	4,956	4,960	4,938
phase 1	1,002	1,007	1,004	1,004	1,003	1,004	999
phase 2	1,099	1,102	1,099	1,100	1,104	1,100	1,095
phase 3	1,466	1,463	1,465	1,464	1,462	1,467	1,460
phase 4	1,388	1,386	1,388	1,389	1,387	1,389	1,384
Total number of “very large schools”	133	147	169	198	245	1,533	1,590

Source: Education Management Information System (EMIS). The shaded areas denote when the schools started receiving the PSIP treatment.

9.10. ANALYSIS OF PSIP SCHOOL GRANTS RECEIVED

District	PSIP Phase	Average SIG entitlement sample schools	Average SIG Amount sample schools received	% SIG funds received	Average SIG entitlement sample schools	Average SIG Amount sample schools received	% SIG funds received	Average SIG entitlement sample schools	Average SIG Amount sample schools received	% SIG funds received	
Year		2010/11			2011/12			2012/13			
Blantyre Urban	1	257,545	150,667	58.50%	311,017	241,493	77.65%	355,655	443,804	124.79%	
Dedza		250,000	143,939	57.58%	300,000	245,000	81.67%	350,000	249,169	71.19%	
Dowa		250,000	163,773	65.51%	300,000	280,636	93.55%	350,000	446,000	127.43%	
Mangochi		250,000	204,059	81.62%	300,000	244,453	81.48%	350,000	479,187	136.91%	
Mulanje		250,000	192,154	76.86%	302,792	275,217	90.89%	355,069	270,741	76.25%	
Nkhata-Bay		250,000	186,962	74.78%	300,000	275,450	91.82%	350,000	322,916	92.26%	
PHASE 1		250,545	175,937	70.22%	301,234	259,953	86.30%	351,203	356,804	101.59%	
Blantyre Rural	2				300,000	257,692	85.90%	350,000	296,154	84.62%	
Mzimba North					300,000	223,894	74.63%	350,000	325,666	93.05%	
Ntcheu					300,000	150,406	50.14%	350,000	316,975	90.56%	
Salima					310,083	55,833	18.01%	364,390	399,939	109.76%	
Thyolo					300,000	281,328	93.78%	350,000	306,676	87.62%	
Zomba Rural					307,324	308,632	100.43%	363,765	295,417	81.21%	
PHASE 2					302,790	217,750	71.91%	354,621	320,360	90.34%	
Balaka	3							353,070	292,162	82.75%	
Chikwawa								352,982	315,385	89.35%	
Chiradzulu								350,000	631,742	180.50%	
Karonga								350,000	117,273	33.51%	
Kasungu								355,876	330,375	92.83%	
Lilongwe Urban								350,000	489,634	139.90%	
Mchinji								350,000	233,500	66.71%	
Mzuzu City								350,000	305,000	87.14%	
Nsanje								350,000	305,395	87.26%	
Ntchisi								350,000	298,343	85.24%	
Phalombe								350,000	304,803	87.09%	
Zomba Urban								350,000	-	0.00%	
PHASE 3								351,805	309,298	87.92%	
Chitipa		4									
Likoma											
Lilongwe RE											
Lilongwe RW											
Machinga											
Mwanza											
Mzimba South											
Neno											
Nkhotakota											
Rumphi											

Source: Government of Malawi (2013b)

9.11. ANALYSIS OF SCHOOL GRANT USE (2010/11 – 2012/13)

Spending Type	Total Spent	as % of total spent	Total Spent	as % of total spent	Total Spent	as % of total spent	Total Spent	as % of total spent
Year	2010/11		2011/12		2012/13		Cumulative	
Facility upgrades	3,684,506	34%	15,830,112	42%	24,151,334	38%	43,665,952	39%
Supplies bought	3,114,535	29%	13,037,846	35%	19,139,556	30%	35,291,936	32%
Contracts/ Training	2,244,411	21%	2,244,411	6%	11,731,789	19%	16,220,611	15%
School Programmes/ Activities	1,798,614	17%	6,185,203	17%	8,134,648	13%	16,118,466	14%
Total school grant spending	10,842,066	100%	37,297,571	100%	63,157,327	100%	111,296,964	100%

Source: based on data from Government of Malawi (2013b)

9.12. VARIATION IN PSIP EFFECT BASED ON LENGTH OF EXPOSURE

Table Appendix 9.12a PSIP effect on exam pass rate depending on years of exposure

<i>Pass exam</i>	(1)	(2)
After year 1	0.029*** (0.009)	0.0012 (0.009)
After year 2	0.030*** (0.011)	0.01 (0.011)
After year 3	0.038* (0.022)	-0.127*** (0.024)
PSIP effect (year 1)	0.045*** (0.012)	0.049*** (0.012)
PSIP effect (year 2)	0.039** (0.017)	0.039** (0.017)
PSIP effect (year 3)	0.014 (0.013)	0.0051 (0.013)
Pupil enrolment	0.0002*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Pupil to Teacher ratio	-0.0009*** (0.0001)	-0.0002 (0.0001)
% teachers with MCE	0.057** (0.029)	-0.125*** (0.029)
# supervision visits	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.0002 (0.002)
Observations	12,616	12,616
R-squared	0.033	0.137
Number of schools	1,969	1,969
School Fixed Effects	Y	Y
Year Fixed Effects	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table Appendix 9.12b PSIP effect on school dropout rate depending on years of exposure

<i>Dropout</i>	(1)	(2)
After year 1	0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
After year 2	-0.003** (0.002)	-0.002 (0.002)
After year 3	-0.005* (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)
PSIP effect (year 1)	-0.006*** (0.002)	-0.006*** (0.002)
PSIP effect (year 2)	-0.009*** (0.002)	-0.009*** (0.002)
PSIP effect (year 3)	-0.011*** (0.002)	-0.011*** (0.002)
Pupil enrolment	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Pupil to Teacher ratio	0.000 (0.000)	0.000** (0.000)
% teachers with MCE	-0.000 (0.004)	0.007 (0.004)
# supervision visits	0.0003 (0.0003)	0.0003 (0.0003)
Observations	17,389	17,389
R-squared	0.023	0.029
Number of schools	2,502	2,502
School Fixed Effects	Y	Y
Year Fixed Effects	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table Appendix 9.12c PSIP effect on repetition rate depending on years of exposure

<i>Repetition</i>	(1)	(2)
After year 1	0.004 (0.004)	-0.001 (0.004)
After year 2	0.005 (0.003)	0.0008 (0.003)
After year 3	0.031*** (0.005)	0.020*** (0.005)
PSIP effect (year 1)	-0.005 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.005)
PSIP effect (year 2)	0.001 (0.004)	0.001 (0.004)
PSIP effect (year 3)	-0.002 (0.004)	-0.002 (0.004)
Pupil enrolment	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Pupil to Teacher ratio	0.000*** (0.000)	-0.000*** (0.000)
% teachers with MCE	0.003 (0.006)	-0.006 (0.006)
# supervision visits	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Observations	17,389	17,389
R-squared	0.036	0.038
Number of schools	2,502	2,502
School Fixed Effects	Y	Y
Year Fixed Effects	N	Y
Robust standard errors in parentheses	*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1	

Table Appendix 9.12a PSIP effect on the availability of pit latrines for female pupils depending on years of exposure

<i>Pit Latrine</i>	(1)	(2)
After year 1	-1.05 (2.3)	2.01 (2.42)
After year 2	-3.31 (2.45)	-0.41 (2.58)
After year 3	-5.23 (4.10)	0.51 (4.73)
PSIP effect (year 1)	-11.69*** (3.70)	-11.70*** (3.70)
PSIP effect (year 2)	-10.35** (4.07)	-10.25** (4.06)
PSIP effect (year 3)	-10.17** (4.04)	-9.96** (4.03)
Pupil enrolment	0.095*** (0.009)	0.098*** (0.009)
Pupil to Teacher ratio	0.108*** (0.035)	0.095*** (0.036)
% teachers with MCE	4.67 (4.63)	8.18 (5.09)
# supervision visits	-0.071 (0.37)	-0.093 (0.37)
Observations	10,737	10,737
R-squared	0.066	0.067
Number of schools	2,340	2,340
School Fixed Effects	Y	Y
Year Fixed Effects	N	Y

Robust standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1